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Credit recovery programs utilize an asynchronous online learning platform that is designed for students who are repeating a course they failed in a traditional classroom setting. Although there is a limited body of literature on credit recovery programs, credit recovery is increasingly being used in districts across the country to meet the needs of students who lack the required number of credits to graduate (Viano, 2018). The credit recovery programs researched in this study are designed for students to demonstrate that they have mastered sufficient content in a course in order to earn graduation credit. This instructional approach allowed students to work through course content at their own pace and enabled them to earn course credit in a reduced period of time.

In this qualitative study, I capture the experiences of Black students enrolled in credit recovery programs. I sought to answer the following research questions: (a) What are Black students' experiences in credit recovery programs? (b) To what do participating students attribute their success? (c) What barriers discourage students' efforts to complete credit recovery courses? The theoretical framework for the study was built on the foundation of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

In conducting this study, I relied on in-depth interviews and lab observations as my primary data collection methods. The reader is afforded the opportunity to view credit recovery through the lens of my study participants, all of whom were Black high school students who were at least 18 years old and enrolled in at least one credit recovery course. My study findings reveal that the participants experienced academic challenges in

the past but still want to succeed. I also found that students felt more accountable for their own learning in credit recovery settings. They reported performing better in the focused learning environments that the credit recovery labs provide. However, I also found that lab facilitators played limited rather than active roles in guiding individual student learning. Participants acknowledged that they were motivated by having an opportunity to meet their ultimate goal of graduating. Importantly though, the findings from my study revealed that students may develop computer fatigue and become bored and isolated while in credit recovery programs. These significant barriers can discourage participants' efforts in completing their credit recovery course. The findings of my study led me to question the instructional strategies that are being utilized in traditional classrooms and whether credit recovery is an effective learning solution for Black students who previously failed in the traditional setting. I concluded that credit recovery is not ideal but is better than not having anything at all. In the end, all stakeholders should collectively work to ensure that the proper support follows this sub-group of students, so they can achieve their highest potential and reduce the drop-out rate of Black students across America.

THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK STUDENTS IN HIGH SCHOOL CREDIT RECOVERY PROGRAMS

by

Ahmad Rashad Slade

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, I began my tenure as a central office administrator, serving as the director of instructional technology and innovation. Part of my responsibility included overseeing the credit recovery program. Credit recovery is a strategy that allows students to re-take previously failed courses required for high school graduation and earn credit upon successful completion of the credit recovery courses (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Credit recovery programs help students who have fallen behind get back on track for graduation, without repeating a year of school. Done well, credit recovery can give students a second chance to stay on track for graduation. Done poorly, it creates a second track that threatens school cultures and lowers expectations for the most disadvantaged students and the schools that serve them (Malkus, 2018). Malkus (2018) states, "the idea of credit recovery is not new, nor is it going away. Because of this, we need to understand how widespread these programs are, what the characteristics of schools and students that participate in them are, and how they operate" (p. 18).

According to the Civil Rights Data Collection, 73 percent of high schools have credit recovery programs (Malkus, 2018). Historically, students have taken credit recovery courses during summer school or during the school year. With the introduction of online and blended learning solutions, many districts have developed flexibly paced credit recovery to help students stay on track to graduate instead of finding themselves in

their senior year with no way to graduate. In recent decades, in line with improvements in technology, schools have increasingly opted for online credit recovery programs over traditional face-to-face courses (Noble, Pelika, & Coons, 2017).

In the type of credit recovery program that I examined in my study, students participated in a blended learning environment. Students were required to report to the computer lab at their school with other students enrolled in credit recovery and initial for-credit online courses. There was also an assigned lab facilitator in the lab. Lab facilitators were certified staff members responsible for providing support for the students as needed, although they were not certified in all the content areas in the courses offered online. Based on funding availability, some schools had a full-time position such as a graduation coach to facilitate the lab. Graduation coaches identify students at-risk of dropout, interact directly with students to assist with academic and social needs, develop and deliver intervention services, connect students and families to school and community services and resources, and help students develop goals for their future (Aftunion, n.d.).

Statement of the Problem

Credit recovery programs provide great insight into how racial inequality can thrive in spaces meant to redress racial inequalities (Powell, 2018). Particularly, there is a problem in racial disparity as it pertains to credit recovery enrollment. The problem that remains a concern is the unbalanced enrollment of Black students in credit recovery as compared to students from other races. Powell (2018) states that “on the one hand, credit-recovery programs are a type of equity-focused change effort. On the other hand, these programs are often highly racialized spaces comprised mostly of Black and Brown

students" (p. 1). Pollack and Zirkel (2013) characterize equity-focused improvement efforts as structural, pedagogical, curricular, or procedural change initiatives that are intended to correct identified disparities in educational opportunity or outcomes among groups of students from different demographic backgrounds. Credit recovery efforts are designed to identify and address disparities in the opportunities that students of color have to graduate, in relation to their White student peers. However, the programs can actually drive racial inequality.

Literature reveals that credit recovery programs work to increase graduation rates and decrease high-school dropout rates for academically vulnerable students (Powell, 2018). With districts facing so much pressure to increase graduation rates, credit recovery programs should be enabling learning and not simply churning out credits. The difference in programs from school to school, and district to district, makes it difficult to gauge how widespread problems might be.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my study is to understand the experiences of Black students who are enrolled in credit recovery programs and who are attempting to earn graduation credit for courses they previously failed. My study contributes to existing scholarship surrounding credit recovery programs. Through my study, I now understand the factors to which Black credit recovery students attribute their success in a credit recovery program. My study informs stakeholders how students perceive the credit recovery program as influencing their learning outcomes as compared to a traditional classroom setting. I also

identify the barriers that discourage students' efforts in completing credit recovery courses.

My primary objective was to capture common experiences from the students. The ultimate findings reveal practical information that could benefit other students who are enrolled in credit recovery, in addition to aiding staff who manage and facilitate students in credit recovery programs.

Research Questions

Through my study, I answered the following research question and sub-questions:

1. What are Black students' experiences in credit recovery programs?
    a. To what do participating students attribute their success?
    b. What barriers discourage students' efforts to complete credit recovery courses?

Background Context

To provide background context for my study, I discuss the intended purpose of credit recovery programs. The programs are used as a tool to help students graduate from high school and to aid in dropout prevention. It is important for readers to understand how credit recovery has evolved over the years, while acknowledging the criticism connected to the program. It is also important to understand that limited research has been conducted regarding the effectiveness of credit recovery programs. I describe these and other areas of research more in-depth in my literature review in Chapter II.

Dropout Prevention

Dropout prevention strategies vary in the type of program, services used, frequency, intensity, and duration of contact with students. Credit recovery has opened the door to more opportunity for students that face institutional and personal barriers to graduating from high school, who otherwise would not have graduated (Viano & Henry, 2018). Students who fail courses and enroll in credit recovery are more likely to graduate from high school and less likely to drop out than students who repeat courses in full (Viano & Henry, 2018). Black, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged credit recovery students are less likely to drop out of high school than their peers, and economically disadvantaged credit recovery students are also more likely to graduate from high school (Viano & Henry, 2018).

While students do not graduate from high school for many reasons, state graduation requirements are the only official barrier to graduation. In all but one state (North Dakota), state law sets minimum graduation requirements for all public-school students that include earning a certain number of course credits in order to graduate (Viano & Henry, 2018). Credit recovery is one option for students to accumulate failed credits, and the program has greatly increased in popularity over the last decade. This growing popularity has led to a higher percentage of students graduating and a lower percentage of high school dropouts.

Criticism

As the popularity of credit recovery grows, so does the criticism. Educational stakeholders have expressed concerns over whether students actually learn in credit

recovery programs. As questions arise about the implementation of online credit recovery, there is a critical need for rigorous evidence about the effective use of online credit recovery for high school students. Few studies have empirically examined the effectiveness and potential unintended consequences of credit recovery (Viano & Henry, 2018). Many media reports have accused credit recovery as operating in a way to help students graduate without meeting the standards that are associated with traditional instruction. National Public Radio called credit recovery a questionable quick fix, *Education Week* wrote about it as a scandal, and the *New York Times* included it as part of a system that has produced a counterfeit high school diploma (Gardner, 2016; Rich, 2015; Turner, 2015). In addition, previous researchers described credit and course recovery as "a problematic means toward ensuring students' educational survival" (Peck, Hewitt, Mullen, Lashley, Eldridge, & Douglas, 2015, p. 21).

Credit recovery programs might have the unintended consequence of encouraging students to avoid the rigor of the traditional school setting and opt for what they think is the easier method. Credit recovery is typically shorter in duration and entails less supervision, which can lead to graduation rate inflation and a decline in educational quality. Credit recovery is under scrutiny as being a crutch that school systems depend on to fast-track students to graduation (Warn, 2014). Skeptics believe credit recovery programs are "watered down" substitutes for real classroom settings, and the level of academic quality and authenticity with third-party software applications is a concern. Critics are uncertain whether these programs truly help enhance students' knowledge and improve educational outcomes the way they are intended.

Question of Effectiveness

Despite the rising presence of online credit recovery programs, I have found limited evidence as to their effectiveness in increasing high school graduation rates or their impact on other outcomes of interest. School districts across the country are increasingly using online courses to expand credit recovery options for high school students who need to get back on track toward graduation, but the growing use of online credit recovery for high school students has considerably outpaced the research (Heppen & Rickles, n.d.). There are few rigorous studies that focus specifically on the effectiveness of credit recovery on high school graduation. The What Works Clearinghouse completed a systematic review of research studies on credit recovery programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2015) and was unable to draw conclusions based on existing research about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of credit recovery programs. More research is needed to establish the underlying effects of credit recovery programs, particularly the effects on academic outcomes. There are different ways to measure the impact on students in credit recovery programs. Some programs define success in terms of course completion, while others measure it as a decline in course drops. Others base their assessment on standardized evaluation, grades, graduation rates, and a decrease in student absences. The evidence on credit recovery programs' actual effectiveness, regardless of how it is measured, is mostly anecdotal.

Brief Description of Methods

To answer my research question, I conducted a basic qualitative research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My study included a series of interviews with 8 Black

students who were at least 18 years old and enrolled in one or more credit recovery course. I used a semi-structured interview guide and transcribed my interviews. I then coded the transcripts in order to identify common themes.

My study also includes observation data from 4 credit recovery labs. For the observations, I used an observation guide to capture the students' behaviors in the credit recovery lab. After completing my observations, I coded the field notes to identify common themes. I describe the research setting and participants more in-depth in Chapter 3.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for my study was built on the foundation of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Legal professionals of color introduced CRT in the 1970s to discuss the concerns of race, racism, and the influence or power (Zuberi, 2011). The major principles of CRT hold racism to be ordinary, which disguises day-to-day racism and race-bias in institutional and micro-interactional processes (Dunning-Lozano, 2016). Unlike traditional civil rights, which embrace incrementalism and systematic progress, CRT questions the foundations of the liberal order (Delgado & Stafancic, 2012). Many educators consider themselves critical race theorists who use CRT ideas to understand controversial issues related to school discipline, tracking, curriculum and history, and achievement testing (Delgado & Stafancic, 2012).

Credit recovery is an exclusionary program that allows students to earn graduation credit. The programs are exclusionary based on the requirement of students previously failing a course. Exclusionary programs "safeguard and maintain an

investment in Whiteness, which is achieved through the removal of mostly non-White and low-income youths into a substandard program that offers a limited curriculum and does not prepare students for direct entry into higher education or 'good' jobs" (Dunning-Lozano, 2016, p. 434). In my study, I drew upon elements of CRT to analyze data to provide a more comprehensive view of how racial equity is undermined. Importantly, I "incorporate the 'voice' of students of color" (Dunning-Lozano, 2016, p. 434) to shed light on their experiences in the credit recovery programs. CRT scholars Dixson and Rousseau (2006) maintain "voice" to be "the assertion and acknowledgement of the importance of the personal and community experiences of people of color as sources of knowledge" (Dunning-Lozano, 2016, p. 434).

The basic tenets of CRT as described by Delgado & Stefancic (2012, p. 7) are noted as follows. First, racism is ordinary, not aberrational, which means that racism is difficult to cure or address. Second, our system of White dominance serves important purposes, both psychic and material. This tenet, sometimes called "interest convergence" is framed as the political and legal orientation for Whites to act in the interest of African Americans only when such an act also furthers the interest of the greater White population. A third tenet of CRT, the "social construction" thesis, holds that race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality. Rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient.

Delgado and Stefancic (2012) explain how society constructs the social world through a series of implicit agreements mediated by images, pictures, tales, and scripts. In

many cases, there are predeterminations of "at risk" students enrolled in credit recovery. Some of these predeterminations are supported by existing research, but much of what we believe is self-serving or cruel. My study aimed at casting doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths held by the majority, defined as counter-storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic 2012). I revisit the theoretical framework in Chapter 5.

Researcher Experience

My experience with credit recovery began in 2013 as a central office administrator. Over the years, I have recognized an unbalanced racial enrollment trend in credit recovery that originates from students failing courses the first time they take them. Failed courses create a need for school districts to offer what is considered to be an equitable solution such as credit recovery. Although credit recovery programs do not address the root of the problem for students failing, the programs serve as an alternative solution to earn graduation credit. As a central office administrator, my experience with credit recovery explicitly included reviewing program enrollment data, disaggregating performance reports for school and district leaders, visiting labs, implementation support, sharing best practices locally and nationally, and organizing professional learning sessions for staff who are responsible for facilitating credit recovery labs.

My study broadened my perspective on the intended purpose of credit recovery programs. I acknowledge the benefits of credit recovery programs based on my experience of perceived student success. However, my research led me to question the validity and fidelity of such programs, specifically the interest convergence tenet of CRT described in my theoretical framework. I recognized that I may bring biases, beliefs, and

perceptions to my study based on my experiences as a central office administrator overseeing a credit recovery program.

My primary role in this study was to engage as a researcher to answer the question, "What are Black students' experiences in credit recovery programs?" Part of my role as a researcher was to add to existing research regarding credit recovery programs. Ultimately, the findings could benefit future studies of credit recovery programs. The data collected from observations and interviews support my efforts in contributing to this important topic.

Significance

Research on online credit recovery programs is limited because few states formally track or report student participation in online learning. The few studies that do exist mostly compare the effectiveness—in terms of success rates—of online versus face-to-face programs (Noble et al., 2017). Unfortunately, the studies do not look into the racial inequality that exists in the programs. Credit recovery programs are varied, and their implementations are so flexible, the available data point in no conclusive direction regarding effects or effectiveness. In regard to data collection and program evaluation, credit recovery programs are currently a research topic with far more questions than answers.

My study provides a missing piece in the understanding of a phenomenon that is under-researched, with a perspective from Black students participating in credit recovery. I hope that my research offers ideas for schools to create valuable conditions and experiences for students in this setting, resulting in a meaningful learning experience.

Those who work in this area or with this student population will find my study useful because it provides information that enables them to be more effective and efficient by understanding the student experience in credit recovery programs. Educational leaders who work to address racial inequality may find my study significant concerning the purpose of credit recovery programming, as well as the oversight and student experiences in the programs.

Overview of Chapters

In Chapter II of my study, I review literature that pertains to credit recovery programs. I divide the presentation of the literature into four sections in which I provide an overview of credit recovery, discuss the argument for more research, illustrate the unbalanced racial enrollment in the programs, and explain the theoretical framework of my study.

In Chapter III, I describe the methodology beginning with a description of a pilot study that I conducted, and how it influenced my design choices for my study. Other sections of the methodology include descriptions of the research design, research setting and participants, data collection and analysis, trustworthiness, positionality, and limitations.

I discuss the findings of my research in Chapter IV before concluding with Chapter V. In Chapter V, I analyze the findings of my study as it relates to existing literature and demonstrate how it contributes to the education field.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of my study is to understand the experiences of Black students who are attempting to earn graduation credit for courses they previously failed by enrolling in credit recovery. My study adds an updated inquiry to an area that is under-researched. Importantly, it also contributes recent findings specific to the experiences of Black students in the programs. My interest in this topic stemmed from my observations of students in credit recovery labs in my school district and noticing the racial imbalance of enrollments for the credit recovery program. This chapter examines literature related to credit recovery programs and the racially unbalanced enrollment in the programs. My presentation of the literature is divided into 4 sections:

- An overview of credit recovery
- Credit recovery enrollment
- Credit recovery and students of color
- The argument for more research

I conclude the chapter with an explanation of the limited research on the student experiences in credit recovery programs.

An Overview of Credit Recovery

As previously defined, credit recovery is a strategy that allows students to retake a previously failed course required for high school graduation and earn credit upon

successful completion of the credit recovery course (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The strategy was designed to provide a pathway for high school students who have a history of course failure and help them avoid falling further behind in school (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Credit recovery is intended to decrease high-school dropout rates and increase graduation rates for academically vulnerable students (Powell, 2018). While about 88% of White high school students graduate within four years, only 75% of Black and 78% of Hispanic high school students graduate on time (Rickles, Heppen, Allensworth, Sorensen, & Walters, 2018). In North Carolina, when students fail a course, they have the option to retake the course in its entirety or enroll in credit recovery to earn graduation credit. When students retake a failed course in its entirety, the failing grade is replaced and their grade point average is adjusted based on the new grade. If they choose to enroll in credit recovery and successfully complete it, the previously failed grade is recorded as 'Pass' and counts toward graduation credit only with no impact on the grade point average. In many cases, credit recovery students are considered "at-risk", which includes non-academic indicators that can affect a student's likelihood of achieving success in school. Students who are pregnant, have parents incarcerated, or have a history of drug or alcohol abuse, among other factors, may be considered at-risk. The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) considers students at-risk if they had one or more of the following characteristics (iNACOL, 2015):

- Low socio-economic status
- From a single parent family
- An older sibling dropped out of school

- The student had changed schools two or more times
- Had average grades of "C" or lower from sixth to eighth grade
- Repeated a grade

Schools and districts offer credit recovery in face-to-face and online formats. According to the iNACOL (2015), more than 75% of school districts use blended and online learning for expanded course offerings and credit recovery. Online credit recovery courses, which have helped boost graduation rates nationally, have grown quickly from a barely known concept a decade ago to one of the biggest and most controversial new trends in education (Rickles et al., 2018).

Credit Recovery Enrollment

The unbalanced enrollment of minorities in credit recovery programs point to other systemic issues that are prevalent in K-12 education. According to Priority II of Guilford County Schools Strategic Plan 2022, students of color are over-represented in the frequency and severity of disciplinary action and special education classes. Students of color are under-represented in gifted, honors, Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate and dual enrollment classes, honor societies, and other enrichment opportunities. Based on my experience visiting credit recovery labs, the trend of over-representation for Black students in credit recovery programs also exists. If the credit recovery programs are far less rigorous than their traditional counterparts, students—particularly poor and minority students—are being deprived of the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in college, career, and beyond.

Credit recovery programs in the U.S. have grown rapidly since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, particularly in states that are home to a large number of urban schools with high dropout rates (Le, 2015). Table 1 illustrates the racially unbalanced enrollment from a North Carolina district from 2016-2018. Previous year data (2016-17, 2017-18) indicates that more than half of students (56% and 55% respectively) enrolled in credit recovery are Black.

Table 1

Credit Recovery Enrollment by Race from 2016 to 2018

	Black	White	Hispanic	Other
2016-17 (1,733 enrollments)	56% (975)	20% (343)	17% (294)	7% (121)
2017-18 (2,142 enrollments)	55% (1,187)	19% (400)	20% (421)	6% (134)

In relation to the district's demographics in 2018-19, Black students made up 41% of the district, White students 31%, Hispanic students 16%, and Multi-racial/Other students make up 12%. Data from North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS) also indicates Black students represent a large number of enrollment (41-50%) in its credit recovery program (Stallings, Weiss, Maser, Stanhope, Starcke, & Li, 2016, p. 10).

A U.S. Department of Education survey of principals found that credit recovery programs are more common in high-poverty schools. In a study conducted by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, researchers found that smaller high schools (those with fewer than 1,250 students) are much less likely to have credit recovery programs than larger ones (Tyner & Munyan-Penney, 2018). Higher enrollment in credit recovery is more common

in large and urban schools, charter schools, and schools with higher proportions of poor and minority students. These findings may be viewed as suspicious, given that graduation rates with higher proportions of poor and minority students have risen the fastest. In 9 states, schools with active programs enroll less than 5 percent of students in credit recovery, while 10 states enroll more than 11 percent of students in credit recovery at their schools that have active programs. In 30 states, credit recovery enrollment is less than or equal to the national average of 8.1 percent. Twenty states and the District of Columbia enroll more students in credit recovery than that average (Tyner & Munyan-Penney, 2018).

As shown in Figure 1, the highest levels of credit recovery enrollment are generally found in western states, with lower levels in southeastern and northeastern states. As most states do not have formal credit recovery policies, it is unclear what causes these geographic differences in enrollment.

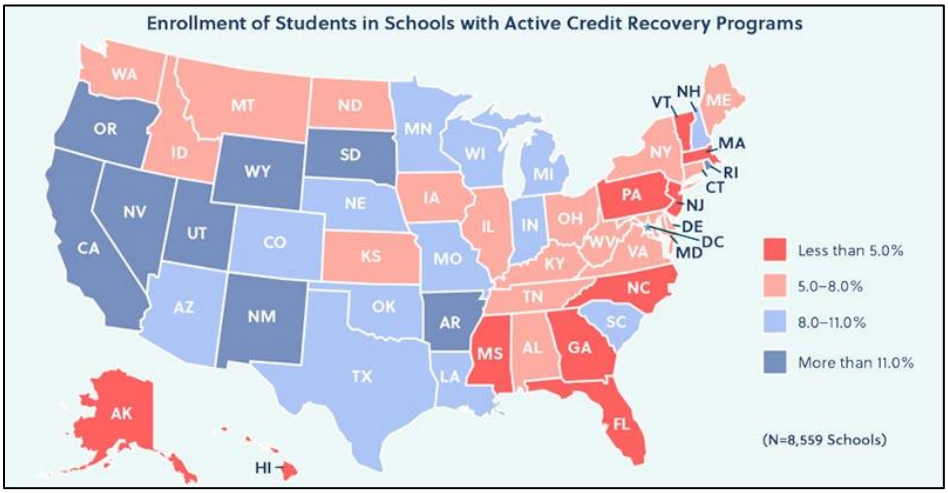

Figure 1. Enrollment of Students in Schools with Active Credit Recovery Programs (Tyner & Munyan-Penney, 2018).

Most large districts enroll a smaller share of students in credit recovery than the national average. In high schools with active programs, 3 of the 45 largest districts enroll less than 1 percent of their students in credit recovery, and 32 enroll less than the national school-wide average of 8.1 percent (Figure 2). Thirteen districts enroll more than 8.1 percent of their students in schools with active credit recovery programs.

State	District	Enrollment in CR in High Schools with Active Programs			Enrollment in CR in all High Schools		
		Percent	Student N	School N	Percent	Student N	School N
FL	Lee County	0.2%	15,981	9	0.1%	23,361	15
FL	Orange County	0.2%	48,945	18	0.2%	52,134	21
TX	Fort Bend ISD	0.4%	23,211	11	0.4%	23,211	11
FL	Polk County	1.0%	23,702	13	0.9%	25,783	16
VA	Fairfax County	1.1%	42,992	19	1.0%	49,060	22
FL	Dade County	1.3%	62,383	33	1.0%	82,521	67
NC	Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools	1.6%	22,088	11	0.9%	40,974	25
VA	Prince William County	1.8%	26,560	11	1.8%	26,560	11
FL	Palm Beach County	1.8%	52,525	25	1.8%	53,741	28
FL	Broward County	1.9%	61,632	26	1.7%	68,331	35
KY	Jefferson County	2.3%	14,515	11	1.4%	24,310	17
GA	Dekalb County	2.6%	23,414	17	2.3%	26,355	19
FL	Pinellas County	3.1%	26,827	15	2.9%	29,354	18
MD	Prince George's County	3.3%	27,160	19	2.7%	34,111	23
NC	Wake County	3.5%	33,026	16	2.5%	46,048	24
GA	Cobb County	3.6%	15,326	7	1.6%	35,011	16
NY	New York City	3.7%	67,666	109	1.8%	140,128	229
GA	Fulton County	4.2%	27,236	15	3.9%	29,144	16
GA	Gwinnett County	4.3%	52,895	19	4.2%	53,861	20
MD	Anne Arundel County	4.3%	21,946	12	4.3%	21,946	12
FL	Seminole County	4.4%	21,460	9	4.4%	21,460	9
TX	Northside ISD	4.4%	12,058	4	1.8%	29,886	11
CA	San Diego USD	4.5%	29,433	25	4.4%	30,103	27
HI	Hawaii Department of Education	4.7%	40,199	28	4.2%	44,958	33
FL	Hillsborough County	5.1%	58,243	28	5.1%	58,512	29
CA	East Side Union	5.3%	22,140	11	5.3%	22,140	11
PA	Philadelphia	5.5%	21,761	27	4.4%	26,843	36
CA	Los Angeles USD	5.9%	75,200	59	3.8%	118,151	104
NC	Guilford County	6.1%	21,954	20	5.9%	22,897	26
FL	Duval County	6.4%	27,187	16	5.8%	30,106	20
TN	Shelby County	6.7%	13,853	13	3.1%	29,868	38
SC	Greenville County	7.8%	21,202	16	7.7%	21,635	17
CA	Sweetwater USD	9.3%	27,348	12	9.3%	27,348	12
MD	Baltimore County	10.3%	26,276	20	10.3%	26,276	20
CO	Jefferson County	10.6%	21,987	16	10.4%	22,277	17
CA	Chaffey Joint Union	14.3%	23,723	8	14.3%	23,723	8
TX	Katy ISD	14.4%	21,234	7	14.4%	21,234	7
TX	Dallas ISD	14.6%	37,823	33	14.3%	38,878	35
IL	City of Chicago	15.6%	65,743	92	15.6%	65,939	93
MD	Montgomery County	16.3%	45,788	25	16.3%	45,788	25
TX	Houston ISD	17.2%	43,661	32	16.2%	46,317	38
AZ	Phoenix Union	19.3%	24,834	12	19.3%	24,834	12
CA	Antelope Valley Union	20.3%	19,650	8	20.3%	19,650	8
NV	Clark County	38.1%	1,303	1	0.6%	90,146	43
CA	Grossmont Union	99.7%	9,092	5	42.5%	21,314	11
Total		7.0%	1,423,182	943	5.1%	1,816,227	1,335

Note: The five districts without active programs—Kern High School District, Long Beach Unified, Albuquerque Public Schools, Cypress-Fairbanks ISD, and North East ISD—are omitted from this table.

Figure 2. Credit Recovery (CR) Enrollment from the 45 Largest Districts in the United States (Tyner & Munyan-Penney, 2018).

The enrollment results from Figure 2 are both promising and troubling trends for credit recovery. It is promising that many high schools are providing students with alternative ways to earn graduation credits. It is troubling that a high enrollment may be cause for concern. High enrollment may indicate that the school and its teachers are not successfully meeting the needs of all students, but also could be indicative that the credit recovery program is less rigorous than other means of earning credit. Schools may rely too much on credit recovery to provide students with easy access to credits without ensuring they have the knowledge and skills to succeed after high school. Most troubling is that high levels of enrollment are significantly more likely to occur in schools serving larger proportions of poor and minority students (Tyner & Munyan-Penney, 2018). If the students are enrolling in low-quality credit recovery programs, this only worsens the problem surrounding racial inequalities.

Credit Recovery and Students of Color

Dunning-Lozano (2016) found that credit recovery programs fail to provide the necessary resources students need to matriculate to college, even as students were led to believe they were meeting the necessary college requirements. There is also evidence that credit recovery programs operate as dumping grounds for students of color that school administrators have difficulty placing, which undermines the purpose of the program and further exacerbates existing racial inequities (Dunning-Lozano, 2016). In schools and credit recovery labs, students' self-esteem can be influenced by negative prevalent perceptions (Livingston & Nahimana, 2006). Dealing with these perceptions is burdensome and could possibly affect personal achievement. In addition, negative

stereotypes may affect attitudes toward education as students take on the persona as the hard-to-engage uninterested learner (Livingston & Nahimana, 2006).

Existing empirical research suggests that credit recovery programs reproduce inequality by racially stratifying students (Dunning-Lozano, 2016). Research from Powell (2018) indicates credit recovery programs disadvantage many students of color by failing to provide the necessary resources needed to succeed. Powell's research suggests that we know less about the ways credit recovery programs advantage White students. Given this, it is important to examine how the programs may simultaneously mitigate and exacerbate racial inequalities. Powell's (2018) study draws from elements of CRT. The study used CRT's Whiteness as property construct and CRT's restrictive equality construct to provide a more comprehensive portrait of how racial equity is undermined. In her study, Powell (2018) introduces the Knowledge Center, which was the name of the school's credit recovery program facilitated by three White women. The mission of the Knowledge Center was to offer more intensive forms of differentiation and personalized instruction, tutoring, study skill instruction, and organizational assistance to students who have failed a course. However, after hearing about the support provided by the Knowledge Center, White parents successfully demanded to get their academically successful students into the program. Parents whose students have all C's or higher felt like their kids were at risk and saw the chance for improvement. One teacher commented, "it seems that in this district, you know, they ask and they shall receive" (p. 8). This comment illustrates what Lewis-McCoy (2014) describes as 'squeaky wheel' parents, defined as vocal White parents being able to bend policies to their advantage because

district officials saw them as valuable. White parents' demands showed that they failed to acknowledge that the school had long prioritized the needs of White students.

The Knowledge Center inadvertently created a fertile ground for White advantage by creating two alternative times for all students to receive support—during lunch and after school. Crafting lunchtime and after school times for students were meant to lessen the likelihood of students flooding the lab during academic hours and diverting resources from students who needed individualized attention. This convergence of interests seemed to be a clever way to lessen administrative and parental requests and still maintain the integrity and original focus of the program. However, what teachers actually did by creating the alternatives was prop up Whiteness and White interests. Powell's example exemplified how restrictive equality was operationalized. Given that Black students who had failed a course continued to make up an overwhelming majority of students overall, concerns that the program could become useless were unwarranted (Powell, 2018, p. 9). White students comprised the majority in only one class. There had not been an influx of students into the regularly scheduled classes because teachers were able to funnel most of the academically successful students seeking services into lunchtime drop-in sessions and homework club. This revealed that teachers intentionally directed students who wanted to use the program as a way to gain an academic edge into the alternative class times.

Viano's (2018) research tells us that some articles that focus on online learning in K–12 education might mention credit recovery in the literature review or methods section that their sample of online learners includes students enrolled in credit recovery. However, when researchers include credit recovery students with other online learners,

this is making an implicit assumption that credit recovery students are similar to, if not identical to, other online learners. Viano (2018) reviewed three reasons this assumption is flawed. First, credit recovery students have previously enrolled in the same course but did not earn course credit due to failing the class. Therefore, students in credit recovery courses have been exposed to the course material before, making credit recovery courses more similar to a remedial course than an advanced or extension course. This aspect of credit recovery should be a concern to researchers. When students taking credit recovery courses are grouped in with students taking advanced online courses, positive effects of taking an advanced course could be diluted by the students who are not learning new material in their online course if the effects of online learning are differentiated between remedial and advanced students. Second, evidence from both credit recovery research and from studies of students who fail courses in general indicates that students in credit recovery courses are likely to have lower technological skills than other online learners. In general, students who fail courses tend to come from at-risk backgrounds where the student will be less likely to have access to technology at home and have lower technological skills compared with other students (Viano, 2018). Researchers who study online learning might be concerned about including credit recovery students into an overall estimate of the effectiveness of online learning because credit recovery students might show lower performance than other online learners due to their lower capacity to access and function at a high level using an online platform. Third, students who have failed one course are more likely to have failed other courses. Students who fail multiple courses are likely to have skill deficits that are not isolated to the courses they fail. For

instance, if credit recovery students are more likely to be poor readers, then online learning will be more difficult for those students who might be learning almost exclusively through a text- heavy online platform.

The key theme that exist across both Powell and Viano's studies points to credit recovery programs disadvantaging Black students. Powell (2018) shines light on ways equity efforts are refashioned to support racial inequalities. Powell's research describes how a credit recovery program that was created to address racial disparities between Black and White students actually advantaged White students and disadvantaged Black students. Viano (2018) explains how the assumption that credit recovery students are similar to other online learners can be misleading. Viano's study has positive results indicating online credit recovery is more effective than repeating a course face-to-face; however, the results should be interpreted with caution because little is known about how grades are assigned in the credit recovery courses.

In February 2019, Students for Education Reform speakers urged the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School board to set higher expectations for credit recovery programs. Students for Education Reform is a New York based nonprofit advocacy group that includes a North Carolina branch. One student shared with the school board that credit recovery does not prepare students for mastery of content, much less for life, and called credit recovery a scam that passes students through a failing system (Helms, 2019). Based on the commonality of Black students being in the majority in credit recovery programs, it is important to understand their perceptions of the program. Scott (2017) provides advocacy for the learning environment of Black students. He mentions that

"traditional classrooms are not meeting the needs of Black students" (p. 25). Specifically, there are technological limitations in low socio-economic schools limiting their ability to increase learning and problem-solving abilities, particularly in math and science classes. His study explains that an active learning classroom is necessary to enable the student to absorb the academic content. The University of North Carolina found that the incorporation and implementation of active learning in classrooms was of benefit to Black students (Holland, 2014). Similarly, it is important for Black students to express what they are currently experiencing and how the credit recovery program could possibly affect their future.

Stallings and his colleagues (2016) examined the academic outcomes for students enrolled in credit recovery programs offered by NCVPS. One of the key findings was that Black students in credit recovery were less likely than students of other racial/ethnic groups to reach proficiency in the recovered courses but were more likely to succeed in subsequent coursework in the same subject area after completion of the credit recovery course (Stallings et al., 2016, p. i). One noted goal of the study was to identify the differences between outcomes for different student subgroups and then identify possible correlations between the outcomes and three key student characteristics:

1. A student's race/ethnicity
2. Whether a student was economically disadvantaged
3. The number of end-of-course exams a student failed in the academic year in which she or he first failed a course (a more nuanced indicator than the raw number of courses failed)

In the study, minority students frequently had higher success rates than White students, not only in terms of re-enrolling the year following credit recovery but also in terms of graduating and graduating on time. However, there were few statistically significant and meaningful patterns across races/ethnicities for improvements in exam scores after credit recovery (Stallings et al., 2016).

The Argument for More Research

Online credit recovery programs are increasingly being used in districts across the country, yet there has been little research about the effectiveness of these programs (Heppen, Sorensen, Allensworth, Walters, Rickles, Taylor, & Michelman, 2017). The literature pertaining to online learning largely ignores credit recovery courses and the students in credit recovery programs (Viano, 2018), leaving us with no definitive enrollment numbers, mechanisms for oversight, or effectiveness data for credit recovery programs.

Based on my review of various literature, I have only found one rigorous evaluation of credit recovery. The evaluation was the first ever federally funded study in Chicago Public Schools in 2016 (Heppen et al., 2017). The study focused on students who re-took Algebra I as part of credit recovery programs facilitated online and face to face. The researchers found that students did not do as well academically using the online credit recovery course as the face-to-face program, but neither format had any effect on whether the student was on track for graduation by the end of sophomore year. The interim findings provide some important cautions about providing online courses to at-

risk, generally low-achieving students, particularly courses with relatively rigorous content and few opportunities for remediation (Heppen et al., 2017).

Despite the rising presence of online credit recovery programs, there exists scant evidence as to their effectiveness in increasing high school graduation rates (Le, 2015). A 2012 report by the Center for Public Education pointed to a lack of overall regulation of credit recovery programs, as well as a lack of any full academic study of their effectiveness. The report found that credit recovery is a highly decentralized, unregulated, and under-researched dropout prevention initiative.

Research and reports specifying the enrollment and prevalence of credit recovery are difficult to come by, with many reports using more rudimentary ways of trying to categorize the popularity of credit recovery (Viano, 2018). The results from a search of ten peer-reviewed journals focusing exclusively on online learning or distance education in the United States are illustrated in Table 2. The search returned 36 articles that mention the term credit recovery. Of the 36 articles, only 6 focus on credit recovery while the remaining 30 pertain to online learning. From the 6 related articles, I found that Viano's research (2018) had the most relevant content pertaining to my study. I cite Viano's work throughout my study to support and expand on the research relating to credit recovery.

Table 2

Credit Recovery Search Results from Peer Reviewed Journals for Online Learning and Distance Education

Journal	Number of results from the keyword search "credit recovery"	Results relevant to "credit recovery"
1. American Journal of Distance Education	1	1
2. Computers in the Schools	1	1
3. Education Next	3	2
4. Journal of Online Learning Research	20	2
5. Journal of Research on Technology in Education	0	0
6. Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration	0	0
7. Online Learning Journal	4	0
8. The Quarterly Review of Distance Education	2	0
9. Journal of Technology and Teacher Education	4	0
10. International Journal of Virtual and Personal Learning Environments	1	0
Total	36	6

Note. Searches performed on October 22, 2019. Searches conducted through LearnTechLib.org.

I also conducted a search of 10 peer-reviewed journals that do not focus exclusively on online learning or distance education in the United States (see Table 3). The search did not return any articles that mention the term credit recovery.

Table 3

Credit Recovery Search Results from Peer Reviewed Journals

Journal	Number of results from the keyword search "credit recovery"	Results relevant to "credit recovery"
1. American Educational Research Journal	0	0
2. American Journal of Education	0	0
3. Educational Researcher	0	0
4. Education and Urban Society	0	0
5. Equity and Excellence in Education	0	0
6. Journal of Curriculum Studies	0	0
7. Journal of Curriculum and Supervision	0	0
8. Journal of Educational Administration	0	0
9. Review of Research in Education	0	0
10. Urban Education	0	0
Total	0	0

Note. Searches performed on October 22, 2019. Searches conducted through LearnTechLib.org

Even with limited research, schools, districts, and states continue to expand credit recovery options and enrollments with a specific goal in mind: increase high school graduation rates (Viano, 2018). Though North Carolina dropout rates have decreased and graduation rates have risen in recent years, considerable public pressure remains for school districts to continue to improve these rates. This pressure has led to increased interest in using online credit recovery to address the issue. However, the practice of

offering online credit recovery may be falsely boosting graduation rates at the expense of rigorous learning experiences for students (Horn, 2017). Too often, the pressure on school administrators, policymakers, and politicians to "do something" conflicts with the need to actually prepare students with the skills they need to achieve success in post-secondary education or work (iNACOL, 2015). The overall literature on the impact of credit recovery can be summed up by the 2015 What Works Clearinghouse report on credit recovery programs: "The What Works Clearinghouse is unable to draw any conclusions based on research about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of credit recovery programs" (US Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse, 2015, p. 1).

Conclusion

My study contributes to the field by sharing the experiences of Black students in credit recovery programs. Creating an effective online credit recovery program is complex, but evidence from the most successful programs show that motivation can be a powerful intervention to improve outcomes for struggling students (Nellie Mae Education Foundation, 2017). My research includes factors that students believe contribute to a successful credit recovery experience. Successful credit recovery programs are rigorous and standards-based, provide a personalized learning curriculum, actively engages learners, and offers data and reporting that teachers and administrators can use to make instructional decisions (Apex Learning Infographic). Over time, as infrastructure, expertise, and research evolve, online credit recovery perceptions may be viewed as effective strategies to not only boost high school graduation rates but also an effective

solution to prepare enrolled students for college and careers. Alternatively, we may find out that credit recovery programs artificially elevate success rates without providing our most marginalized students with what they need to be successful in life.

Studying the experiences of Black students in online credit recovery programs allows me to examine students in the program. Based on participant feedback, I investigate what systems and supports are needed for students to be successful in the alternative learning environment, and how these systems influence the behaviors of Black students.

From a broad perspective, all students need some level of support, encouragement, and reassurance that they can meet their goals in order to graduate. Understanding student experiences could potentially lead to further research that measures the success of students in the credit recovery program. Some districts define success in terms of course completion, while others measure it as a decline in course drops. Others base their assessment on standardized evaluation, grades, graduation rates, and a decrease in student absences (Le, 2015). The evidence on credit recovery programs' actual impact, regardless of how it is measured, is mostly anecdotal. Beyond anecdotal evidence, there is not much empirical researched-based evidence or research on student experiences. The groundwork for such analyses remains elusive, as districts and private providers have not collected adequate data on indicators such as attendance, grade improvement, knowledge enhancement, and graduation rates for students in online credit recovery programs (Le, 2015, para. 7). The lack of research on student experiences in

credit recovery provides an ideal segue into the research questions and methodology that drive my study.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of my study is to understand the experiences of Black students who are enrolled in credit recovery programs and who are attempting to earn graduation credit for courses they previously failed. Research indicates that failing core academic courses during the first year of high school is a strong signal of trouble to come (Heppen et al., 2017). More students fail courses in ninth grade than in any other grade, and a number of these students subsequently drop out. My study documents student experiences and gives a voice to students who participate in credit recovery programs.

My study focuses on the following research and sub questions:

1. What are Black students' experiences in credit recovery programs?
    a. To what do participating students attribute their success?
    b. What barriers discourage students' efforts to complete credit recovery courses?

I am hopeful that the findings of my study serve as a reference for stakeholders responsible for facilitating credit recovery programs, resulting in a meaningful learning experience for the students enrolled in the program.

In this chapter, I describe the methods I used as part of this basic qualitative research study, with the intent to learn about students' personal experiences and

perceptions through interviews and observations. The chapter is organized into 7 sections:

Section 1: Pilot Studies

Section 2: Research Design

Section 3: Research Setting and Participants

Section 4: Data Collection and Analysis

Section 5: Trustworthiness

Section 6: Positionality

Section 7: Limitations

Pilot Studies

I conducted 2 pilot studies to help influence my research design.

Pilot Study 1

In pilot study 1, my goal was to observe the behaviors, attitudes, and supports that were available to students in the credit recovery lab. With this being my first time observing as a researcher, I recognized my lack of ability to stay focused while documenting my findings. I learned how challenging it is for me to distinguish myself from a natural observer to an observer who is watching for research purposes. My focus was misdirected because I was distracted by everything going on in the lab. After reflecting on the pilot, I learned that staying focused during observations is critical. I also learned that recording field notes help to improve the validity of my study. I used the experiences from this pilot to improve my observational practices for my study. After

reviewing the coded observation notes, I noticed a consistency of student behaviors and facilitator actions that may contribute to the findings of my study.

During the pilot, I interviewed a district-level credit recovery coordinator and a district-level credit recovery specialist. It was my goal to gain an understanding of credit recovery from a district lens and to understand the administrative experience of overseeing a credit recovery program. I was curious to learn about their stance on the credit recovery enrollment data for the district and to discuss the actions that have been taken to provide support to schools. I was able to identify four areas of improvement for future interviews as a researcher: 1) minimize bias, 2) avoid steering 3) be clear with my questioning, and 4) stay on track. My research topic was refined by these interviews because it allowed me to collect an administrator view of credit recovery programs from a district specialist and coordinator, while shifting my focus to students. The interview responses also demonstrated how their views may impact the experiences and perceptions of students enrolled in credit recovery programs.

Pilot Study 2

The second pilot was helpful in determining that observations and interviews were best for my study and helped me estimate how much time and resources were necessary. One of my goals for the second pilot was to focus on the quality of my interview questions. I was also interested to learn more about and reflect upon my behavior as an observer. Another goal was to figure out what adjustments were necessary for my interview protocol and how I needed to modify my interview questions to align to my research question.

I conducted an observation at two high schools that were selected based on their credit recovery enrollment. Both schools were in the top 5 as it pertains to the number of students enrolled in credit recovery throughout the district where I conducted my study. During the observations, I took field notes to document the physical setting, behaviors, interactions, participants, activities, conversations, and my own behavior. The observations helped me to better understand how the lab facilitator's expectations impact the student experience in a credit recovery lab. The observations also helped me confirm that I had an answerable research question. While I observed, I was able to identify "look-fors" that could be useful in collecting data to answer my research question, which include:

- How the facilitator greeted students
- Which students were greeted
- How the instructions were communicated at the beginning of class
- Tone of the facilitator while communication to the class
- Facilitator:student relationships and student:student relationships
- Distractions, boundaries, and the overall learning environment

I interviewed a lab facilitator to gain their perspective on how credit recovery contributes to student success. This interview process confirmed that the facilitator questions could be useful for my study and helped me determine that at least 45 minutes would be needed if I was to include a facilitator in my study. The questions were designed to collect feedback on their credit recovery program implementation and incorporated questions using the following themes:

- Role specific
- Program goals
- Necessary student supports
- Student expectations
- Motivators for students
- Administrative goals for credit recovery

I also interviewed two students that were enrolled in credit recovery. It was my intention to focus on their responses to see how they aligned to my proposed research question and sub-questions for my study. I expected the interviews to last approximately 30 minutes, but they only lasted 13 minutes and 15 minutes respectively. After the student interviews, I realized that my questions were not aligned as well as I hoped with my research question. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) states that pilot interviews are crucial for trying out your questions. The key to getting good data from interviewing is to ask good questions, and asking good questions takes practice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During both student interviews, I noticed that I needed to continuously probe in order for them to elaborate more on their responses. I used recorded audio to help me identify what adjustments would be needed for my interview questions.

Based on the results of the pilot, I realized that I needed to update my interview questions to better support my research question. The pilot was good practice for me as an observer. It allowed me to reflect on my own behaviors and experience how my positionality may impact the behaviors of the students and facilitators. I learned how impactful an observation can be in understanding the student experience in credit

recovery labs. I learned that I would need to spend more time observing the behaviors of the facilitators and students to collect enough observational data to establish any pertinent themes. The pilot helped me to recognize that 4 lab observations are adequate for my actual study, and it helped me to determine the number of student interviews that I conduct for my study (8 interviews). I experienced struggles during the pilot that helped shape my study. One of the struggles included my positionality as a district administrator researching a program that I oversee. It was difficult to for me to refrain from immediately reporting my findings to building and district administrators as an administrator of the district's credit recovery program. I learned that my findings may help improve the overall district program, but my purpose as a researcher is not to be evaluative or intrusive.

Research Design

For my study, I used basic qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lichtman (2012) defines qualitative research as:

> Qualitative research is a general term. It is a way of knowing in which a researcher gathers, organizes, and interprets information obtained from humans using his or her eyes and ears as filters. It often involves in-depth interviews and/or observations of humans in natural, online, or social settings. (p. 7)

Lichtman (2012) also explains that qualitative research is most appropriate when researchers need answers to those 'what and why' questions that cannot be addressed by analyzing numerical data. These types of questions are most appropriately addressed by in-depth interviews, surveys, and observations of participants in the natural setting (Lichtman, 2012).

My research interest and data collection methods support basic qualitative research. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) identify 6 of the most common traditions used in qualitative research studies as "basic qualitative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, narrative analysis, and qualitative case studies" (p. 23). The basic qualitative study is the most common research approach in the fields of education, administration, social work, and counseling, and is the most relevant approach to help me to answer the questions that drive my study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Although a basic qualitative research approach was used for my study, I drew upon elements of phenomenology. Phenomenological research involves the "attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 31). When using a phenomenological approach, researchers seek to understand people's experiences during events and situations they encounter. Using phenomenology gives a snapshot of a particular time, concept, or experience in written form so readers can visualize or understand what persons have experienced (Hug, 1998, as cited in Bergstrom, 2004). Creswell (2013) states that phenomenological studies focus on the experiences that were lived by the individuals who were being interviewed.

For my study, I used audio recording while I conducted 8 semi-structured interviews with students enrolled in credit recovery. Audio recording ensures that everything said is preserved for analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To bring about positive interaction, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest interviewers "be respectful, nonjudgmental, and non-threatening" (p. 129). Without those skills, the interview could

become problematic and genuine responses may be withheld. I considered the possibility of arranging follow-up interviews based on their responses, but they were not needed.

I conducted 4 lab observations, guided by Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) checklist of elements likely to be present in any setting. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) tells us that "observation is a research tool when it is systematic, when it addresses a specific research question, and when it is subject to the checks and balances in producing trustworthy results" (p. 138). The most important factor in determining what to observe is the researcher's purpose in conducting the study in the first place (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My purpose for conducting observations was to be part of the learning environment and witness the behaviors of the students. By observing, I hoped to determine how the behaviors contribute to the overall student experience. Guest et al. (2013) suggest that researchers go where the action is, whether that is a school, community, or homes. Before doing this, it is important to build rapport with the participants and spend enough time interacting to get the needed data (Guest, et al., 2013) while clearly outlining the expectations for their participation in the study.

Research Setting and Participants

The primary setting for my study took place in four North Carolina high school credit recovery labs. The labs were in a school district that serves students in urban, suburban and rural areas. Three of the four high schools in my study are Title I and received federal funding designated to assist with providing all children a significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education. The student ethnic composition of the district was predominantly Black (41%), White (31%), and Hispanic

(16%). The credit recovery labs selected had at least 25 Black students enrolled in their credit recovery program, who were at least 18 years old. Table 4 illustrates the overall racial and ethnic composition of the 4 schools included in my study.

Table 4

Racial and Ethnic Composition of Participating Schools

Race	**School 1 (Title I)**	**School 2 (Title I)**	**School 3 (Title I)**	**School 4**
Black	81%	52%	49%	42%
White	2%	21%	3%	35%
Hispanic	12%	20%	35%	12%
Asian	2%	2%	8%	6%
American Indian	0%	0%	1%	0%
Multiracial	3%	5%	4%	4%
Pacific Islander	0%	0%	1%	0%

I interviewed eight students who were racially categorized as Black and enrolled in at least one credit recovery course. Some of the students previously completed a credit recovery course, while others were enrolled for the first time. The rationale of interviewing students who had completed credit recovery courses as well as students who were taking it for the first time helped me understand what factors previously enabled their success in completing a credit recovery course. This approach provided student experiences from different perspectives.

Data Collection

The pilot studies helped shape my decision to use interviews and observations as my data collection methods. I used both methods to answer my research question.

Interviews

The main purpose of an interview is to find out "what is in and on someone else's mind" (Patton, 2015, p. 426). As Patton explains,

> We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe . . . We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective.

The first step in my data collection process consisted of semi-structured interviews at the participating schools with the selected students. I interviewed students using open-ended questions to gain a perspective of their credit recovery experiences. Lichtman (2012) defines semi-structured interviews as interviews that are facilitated from a "general set of questions and format that you follow and use with all participants" (p. 191). For students who have previously completed a credit recovery course, I asked comparison questions to link their current experience to their previous experience. Comparison questions challenge participants to give meaning to current situations and experiences by reflecting on previous experiences; these questions allow them to draw comparisons between the past and present (Lichtman, 2012).

It was important for me to ask interview questions that would help answer my research question. Good interview questions are those that are open-ended and yield descriptive data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In order to protect the identities of the interviewees, I used pseudonyms. A list of interview questions can be found in the appendix of my study (Appendix A).

Observations

An observation is a research tool when it is systematic, when it addresses a specific research question, and when it is subject to the checks and balances in producing trustworthy results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Bernard (2006) identifies 5 reasons for conducting participant observation research (p. 284):

1. Opening up the areas of inquiry to collect a wider range of data
2. Reducing the problem of reactivity
3. Enabling researchers to know what questions to ask
4. Gaining intuitive understanding of the meaning of your data
5. Addressing problems that are simply unavailable to other data collection techniques

For my study, I conducted credit recovery lab observations to identify comparative themes. The goal of the observations was to observe student behaviors while they were happening and observe how students responded to those behaviors. In addition to Benard's (2006) 5 reasons for using observations, there are several benefits of using them. Guest, Namey, and Mitchell (2013, p. 81) outline the benefits of observations as follows:

- Identifying behaviors that might go unreported or be missed due to the limitations of procedural memory. Highly routine or unconscious behaviors are notoriously easy to miss during interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Seeing these occur in a participant observation setting allows them to become part of the data.
- Lessening reporting biases. Those without direct knowledge of a social scene may collect data that reflect their own points of view rather than the social reality of the people in it.
- Integrating the observed behavior into its physical context. If the location and setting of the behavior of interest are critical to understanding, participant observation allows you to see and experience how the setting and the behavior interact.
- Seeing the behavior I am interested in as it happens. Seeing is believing, and seeing is often data collection as well. Participant observation puts you in direct contact with the phenomena of interest in a way unrivaled by other data collection techniques.

Through my observations, I documented distractors, motivators, communicated and unwritten expectations, and personal experiences. I used an observation guide to collect field notes of what was seen, heard, and felt during the observation. The observation guide was developed based on Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) research and is included in the appendix of my study (Appendix B).

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is an ongoing process that involves breaking data into meaningful parts for the purpose of examining them (Savin-Badin & Major, 2013). The ultimate goal of qualitative data analysis is to make sense of the data, with an intentional effort toward answering the research question (Savin-Badin & Major, 2013). The practical goal of data analysis is to find answers to my research question. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explains that the process is a dialectic in which you move between seeing the big picture and the particulars. For my study, I employed several of Merriam and Tisdell's processes for analyzing data from my interviews and observations. As I analyzed the data, I kept the purpose of my study at the forefront of the process.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain, "coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data" (p.199). After I coded the data, I then categorized it. After categorizing my codes, I identified 4 themes that reflect common ideas and trends from the interview data. The constant comparative method of data analysis is inductive and comparative and so has been widely used throughout qualitative research to generate findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Trustworthiness

I ensure trustworthiness through lab observations and student interviews. While observing and interviewing, I was intentional not to disrupt student progress in the lab. To avoid being intrusive, I adhered to the students' right to privacy, informed consent, and deception ahead of time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Rallis (2010) explained that

researchers should also identify their ethical perspective to produce knowledge that can be used for improvement. They should ask questions to themselves such as, “What are my values?” or “What moral principles guide my decisions?” (Rallis, 2010, p. 437). Finally, during informal lab visits and dialogue with the lab facilitators, I was able to build ethical relationships with participants.

I compared the data collected from my interviews and observations to support the trustworthiness of my study. Based on the pilot results of my study, I was able to determine that 4 observations and 8 interviews were enough to collect the necessary data. I was willing to conduct additional observations and interviews if necessary. Although it was not necessary, I was prepared to select additional students to be sure that I was adequately engaged in my study. Adequate engagement is when “data and emerging finding [must] feel saturated” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). With such a small sample, I understood that it was unlikely that I would reach absolute saturation. However, by the end of the data collection process, I hoped to notice some level of data repetition to add a level of trustworthiness to my research.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As a researcher, it is important to explain my biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher’s position, or reflexivity, is how the researcher affects and is affected by the research process. At the time of my study, I served as the director of a department that manages the district credit recovery program. My previous visits and experiences in credit recovery labs stimulated my interest in this study. For my study, I drew upon my

experiences and contributed those experiences to my research. In doing so, I had to refrain from assuming confirmation bias. Confirmation bias occurs when a researcher forms a hypothesis or belief and uses respondents' information to confirm that belief (Sarniak, 2015).

The implications of conducting a study in my own district were both beneficial and detrimental. Benefits included having access to credit recovery labs, data, and historical trends, along with the ability to leverage existing relationships with staff to support my research efforts. On the other hand, it was imperative that I separated myself as a researcher and an administrator. I had to avoid allowing my experiences as an administrator to influence my interpretation of the research participants' experiences.

In a study of the role of reflexivity, Probst and Berenson (2014) note: "Reflexivity is generally understood as awareness of the influence the researcher has on what is being studied and, simultaneously, of how the research process affects the researcher. It is both a state of mind and a set of actions" (p. 814). This implies that qualitative research is a logical process that affects the participants to some extent, including me as a researcher. To capitalize on my positionality, I employed reflexive strategies to address the increased possibility of bias. To avoid acquiescence bias, I developed interview questions that do not suggest a right answer. Acquiescence bias occurs when a respondent demonstrates a tendency to agree with and be positive about whatever the moderator presents (Sarniak, 2015). After interviewing participants, I asked them to review my results to verify whether my interpretations seemed to be representative of their beliefs. I was cognizant of the need to be reflexive during my research. I understood that my perspectives,

experiences, and position could possibly influence my research. I kept a reflexivity journal to write about my understanding and account for my personal beliefs and opinions related to my study. The reflexivity journal served as an audit trail that describes how data was collected. It includes my reflections, questions, and decisions that I made with regard to problems, issues, or ideas I encountered (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Essentially, it is a detailed account of how my study was conducted and how the data were analyzed. My study allows me to use my personal connections to the study in ways to benefit rather than undermine the research (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

Limitations

There is not a one-way approach to facilitating a credit recovery lab, as there is not a single way to teach in a traditional classroom. Some schools hire a full-time lab facilitator while others utilize different staff members for each period of the day. Student demographics vary from one school to the next, so the experiences vary as well. Due to the limited sample size in my study and the various methods of facilitating, the data is not intended to be comprehensive. In addition, the students have a range of experiences with credit recovery. The findings from my study are considered to be a sampling of experiences and do not generalize the student experience in all credit recovery labs.

It is important that the reader notes the nature of this study, as it was limited to the experiences of only 8 Black students in a large urban school district. The students were at least 18 years old and were enrolled in at least 1 credit recovery course. It would not be practical for future researchers to determine that the participant's experiences and responses reflect all Black students enrolled in credit recovery. Readers must also

understand that the findings from this study are a sampling of experiences and challenges rather than an exhaustive list. Readers who prefer numerical data may not view this study's descriptive data as effective. The choice to interview only one ethnicity may limit the number of interested parties. Educators who prefer to read about more ethnicities or who do not teach in an urban setting may assume that the study does not apply to their interest.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings from the interviews and observations that I conducted for my study. The findings stem from interview transcripts, observation notes, and journal reflections that answer the following research and sub questions:

1. What are Black students' experiences in credit recovery programs?
    a. To what do participating students attribute their success?
    b. What barriers discourage students' efforts to complete credit recovery courses?

The chapter is organized into four separate sections. In Section I, I introduce my participants. In Section II, I describe my findings from the eight interviews that I conducted. In Section III, I present the findings from the four observations that I conducted. In Section IV, I describe the four themes that emerged from my analysis of the data.

Section I: Participant Profiles

To conduct this study, I interviewed eight students from various schools within the same district. The participants were at least 18 years old, racially categorized as Black, and enrolled in credit recovery. I used pseudonyms as outlined in the table below:

Table 5

Participant Pseudonyms, Gender, Race, and Age

Student Name	Gender	Race	Age
Zoey	Female	Black	18
Jackie	Female	Black	18
Sierra	Female	Black	18
Nakia	Female	Black	19
Carl	Male	Black	18
Teddy	Male	Black	18
Samuel	Male	Black	19
Cole	Male	Black	18

Zoey was an 18-year-old Black female who had been at the school for all 4 years of her high school career. Zoey shared that high school has been a good experience for her, but it has been challenging. She struggled with math and was currently taking her first credit recovery course, which was Math 2. She also needed to recover a Spanish credit by the end of the semester.

Jackie was an 18-year-old Black female who worked after school, in addition to taking care of her mom. School had been a negative experience for her. She explained that she had been in multiple fights and suspensions since middle school. She described her senior year as being stressful, although she had not been involved in any fights. She was recovering a Spanish course, which was the only class she ever failed.

Sierra was an 18-year-old Black female who enjoyed sleeping and hanging out with her boyfriend. Her experience in school had been up and down as she explained that

the teachers at her current school “don’t know how to teach.” She transferred from another school within the district and commented “the teachers at my previous school were better.” Sierra had failed English I twice in the traditional classroom and eventually earned her credit through credit recovery. She was currently recovering English IV since she failed it the previous fall semester in the traditional classroom.

Nakia was a 19-year-old Black female who preferred being outside and staying active. School was positive for her until tenth grade. During this time, she began smoking, hanging out, and even dropped out. To catch up on credits, she had already recovered American History and was recovering Advanced Functions and Modeling and English IV at the time of the interview.

Carl was an 18-year-old Black male who enjoyed playing football and basketball for recreational purposes. Because of his grades, he was not eligible to play for the school. He also enjoyed playing video games. Carl failed his first course in 10^{th} grade and this was not his first time in credit recovery. He had recovered English II previously and was currently recovering Math 2.

Teddy was an 18-year-old Black male who was interested in science and music. He shared that he was always looking for challenge outside of school because school was boring to him. His main reason for coming to school was the social aspect. He failed Biology in the traditional course, failed it again in credit recovery, and eventually passed it when he took it again in the traditional classroom. He failed American History I in the traditional classroom and was recovering it through credit recovery.

Samuel was a 19-year-old Black male who was born and raised in New York. He had a strong interest in music, arts, and entertaining. Samuel shared that he started taking school serious during his junior year. He believed that school should be "done" differently to pique the interest of students. He failed Math I in the traditional classroom but had already recovered the course successfully. He was recovering Civics & Economics during the time of the study.

Cole was an 18-year-old Black male who shared with me that, "school does not capture my attention." He felt as if most of the content being taught was not used in everyday life. His interest in school shifted for the worse when he began high school. He described himself as a student who "plays school" since his interest and motivation were elsewhere. In most classes, he would easily pass assessments, complete his work, and answer questions. Cole believed that there were other ways to learn other than sitting in a class being lectured to. Math was his weakness, and Math 1 was one of the courses he failed. His reasoning for failing Math 1 was not because of the work. He did not feel the teacher wanted him there. Ironically, he passed the end of course Math assessment but failed the actual class in the traditional classroom. He previously earned his Math 1 credit through credit recovery, in addition to recovering English II. He was completing English III through credit recovery as his final recovery course.

Section II: Interviews

Part of my data collection included the use of semi structured interviews, which allowed students to expound upon the questions listed on the interview guide (Appendix

A). I organized the questions in categories aligned to the study's research and sub questions. I will provide the findings from the interviews in this section.

The students in my study consistently expressed their desire to successfully complete their credit recovery course with a common goal in mind: graduating at the end of the school year. They shared their experiences of when they failed their class the first time and discussed how they have matured since then. In my interview with Sierra, she shared,

> I'm recovering English IV right now because I failed it last semester. The class, it wasn't that it was hard, but the teacher wasn't teaching us at all. She was just giving us book work; book work. The reason I failed was because of my senior project. I didn't have no time and I wasn't at school because of family issues. When I did it, I finished it and everything, then my flash drive broke. So now I'm in it now for credit recovery. This is my last chance so I have to pass it so I can graduate in June!

Sierra was progressing in her credit recovery course and had a positive relationship with the credit recovery lab facilitator. She shared with me her plans to attend community college and her aspiration to work with computers after graduating.

Another student, Jackie, was recovering a Spanish course that she had previously failed in the traditional classroom. She spoke about her senior year and her purpose for recovering the course.

> My senior year has been stressful. It's stressful because I got all my graduation credits, but I'm trying to get my Spanish credit because I'm trying to go to college. I just want to pass. I want to do everything that I can to just keep that grade up 'cause it be getting hard online. I failed the (regular) course the first time because I get distracted easily by my friends. In the credit recovery lab, it's just me and the computer. But, you gotta be real focused with it to understand, 'cause it's like a teacher's not teaching you; the computer is teaching you, so you really

> gotta focus on it. I want to be in Nursing and open up my own business. I already got accepted to ECPI, but I want to go to UNCG. I got accepted, but I gotta get this credit out of the way. I only have this course and PE during the day and then I go home.

Cole's credit recovery situation was slightly different than some of the other students because he needed to recover two courses before the end of the semester. Cole shared with me:

> I didn't fail my Math 1 course because I failed tests and stuff. I failed because my teacher never wanted me there. I would come in there and want to do something and be myself. I'd come in there and she would say, Cole- I don't even wanna deal with you today. Go ahead and go to lunch; stay at lunch the whole period. So I was just go to lunch or chill in ISS. I failed her class but passed the EOC. So, the next year, I had to retake the class but not the EOC, and that slowed me down. Well, during that same year, I failed English II. If I would have passed the Math 1 course, then I would not be as far behind as I am. I failed a couple of other courses that I already recovered. Right now, I'm recovering English IV and American History. I started late because I was working, but I finished one of the courses already.

Cole also shared his aspirations to go to college but made it clear that "college is not necessary if you know what you're doing. I don't want to waste money for college if I don't have to. What I'm saying is, I like music and I can play the piano and the guitar. If you give me an instrument, I will figure out how to play it and don't need college for that. Ultimately, I want to be a musician or an actor."

Teddy talked about his experience of failing Biology and American History I in the same semester. When asked why he failed, he said,

> I don't know what it was, but I had no enjoyment out of it, so I saw no excitement or real reason to want to attempt to try it or anything until I got older and realized that it's really gonna be important in life and I'm gonna need it. In all honesty,

> before taking credit recovery I was thinking about dropping out because I didn't think I would make it. Apparently, my dad dropped out and I didn't want to follow those same footsteps.

Students are not always successful taking credit recovery courses. Teddy explained that he failed Biology again through credit recovery and re-enrolled in the course in a traditional classroom where he eventually passed. It was evident that he needed the instructional support from a Biology teacher, but he shared that the credit recovery course helped him when he reenrolled in the regular course again. Jokingly, Teddy said "I figured the third time's a charm and I knew it was getting close to the end of the road for me. That last time taking it, I killed the exam and the course", which means he successfully passed the course. He was excited that he was almost complete with his American History I credit recovery course and was looking forward to graduating. Teddy acknowledged that he was focused on getting through the course, but also acknowledged how much he had learned. He let me know,

> Most certainly I was just doing it to get through it, but while I was going through it, I'll admit; I learned a lot. There's a chance that I may go to college, but it depends on how I feel at the time. I know there are different ways of defining success. As long as I can support my family, I feel like that's success. The first step to getting there is graduating from high school.

Teddy also expressed his desire to support his family by pursuing his interest in science, music, or game design.

Zoey was taking credit recovery for the first time. She was enrolled in a Math 2 credit recovery course and needed the credit to graduate. She provided an example of how she has grown as a student since failing the Math 2 course. Zoey failed the course

initially because she did not turn in assignments. Her comments on how she matured and learned from those mistakes were described as followed:

> I failed because I didn't turn stuff in. I was unorganized back then and would lose papers all the time. I'm more organized now and more focused because I know I need to graduate. I used to get distracted easily by other people in the class or by my phone or just socializing, but now I know better. I remember somebody saying when you know better you do better (*laughing*)!

She described how disappointed her family was after failing the course. She used that as motivation to remain focused in passing her credit recovery course. She said that graduating will hopefully makeup for her shortcomings as she plans to go to cosmetology school.

When interviewing Nakia, she explained the challenges that she faced in school and how credit recovery gives her hope to graduate. She experienced the most challenges in school compared to the other students interviewed, and she needed the most credits in order to graduate. She was enrolled in 3 credit recovery courses and shared that she would have dropped out a long time ago without credit recovery. Nakia was direct in sharing the importance of credit recovery as an option to earn graduation credit, but she was not concerned about learning the content within the courses.

> I'm here to graduate. Elementary and middle school was easy. When I got to high school, it wasn't like everybody said it would be with the bullying and teasing; just stuff that they say high school be. But when I got in 10th grade, I started skipping class, smoking, and just hanging out. I kept getting in trouble and was in and out of jail, which was affecting my grades. I dropped out a couple of times. Now I just look at it like, am I gonna go to college? I'm like yeah, but at first I was like no because I can't even get out of school right now. But I know I need to graduate because I want to be something in life and not be how people label me as. Honestly, I don't feel like I need this class in life, I just need it to graduate so

> I'm not really focusing on learning the stuff in the course. I'm just going through it to get my credit to graduate.

Even through these challenges, Nakia remains optimistic about her future. I could hear the passion in her voice when she discussed her plans to go to college for music. She explained her interest in the arts and aspires to become a DJ, photographer, or a business owner. She described how she has matured by saying:

> I'm more focused now. I used to be in trouble all the time, but now I just come to school, do my work, and leave. I used to get distracted at school, but it's like I'm past that now. I'm 'bout my business but hope it's not too late. I've been recovering credits for like 2 to 3 years and I know if I didn't have the chance to take credit recovery, it would add extra years of high school for me, and I don't know if I'm down for that. I'm ready to move on . . .

She was proud to have overcome her challenges, which she claims will make graduation even better. She said, "I have the support at school to help me graduate. That's what I love about my school, they want to see all students succeed. So they're gonna do anything they can to make sure we graduate. If we don't, that's our fault."

For Carl, his junior year was the most challenging for him. During this time, he started hanging with the wrong group of friends, failed his first class, and constantly skipped class. At the beginning of his senior year, he completed a Math 2 credit recovery course and was currently taking 2 additional credit recovery courses; American History and English IV. Carl shared,

> I'm just trying to get through the courses so I can graduate. I take ownership for failing the courses because I didn't take it serious. I used to fail quizzes all the time. I never came to class. I always overslept and didn't make it to that 1st block math class, which is why I failed.

Carl understood that this was his “final lap” of high school. He shared his desire to go to college to become a mechanical engineer. Out of curiosity, I asked if he had taken steps to apply to college, and his response was, “no, not yet. I know it’s gonna be a process. I gotta get my diploma first, and I’ma be real with you—I didn’t even know if that would happen. As a matter of fact, without credit recovery, I know I wouldn’t be walking across the stage. Credit recovery gives me hope.”

Samuel shared his experience of coming to school mainly to socialize. Because of this, he failed a couple of courses leading up to his senior year. Samuel recalled failing his first course as a freshman, which was Math 1. He explained how he began to take school seriously as he approached his senior year.

> As I got older, I started taking school serious. I think school should be done differently so students are not so disconnected. I failed my math class because my friends were in there and it was straight up boring. I just couldn’t do that class or the teacher. She always wanted to share her personal stories so I just sat in the back and talked to my friends the whole time. Right now I’m recovering civics & another course. I can’t remember what the other course is but it will open up once I’m done with civics. To be real, my goal is to just get the credits so I can graduate. I failed civics because I talked all the time to my best friend. That was the only class that I wanted to go to because he was in there. I take full responsibility for failing that course and the bad thing is, my friend failed too.

He needed to recover two credits in order to graduate and was working through his parents’ recent divorce.

> My parents divorced in November, so I gotta make sure I step up for my mom. I gotta make sure I come to school so I can graduate and help provide. I don’t want her to have to worry about taking care of me by herself, especially since I’m older now.

Samuel's main goal was to get his diploma so he would not be "stuck in the streets." He discussed his future goals of becoming a multi-genre music producer. He explained,

> I want to make sure my family is straight. Not with just money, but I want to be somebody they can call for support, for love. My top goal is to see the family successful. When I get my diploma, I may not be able to get a fancy job, but at least I'll have something and can help out a little bit."

Credit recovery courses are self-directed by design and require students to work independently to be successful. This could be challenging for students who have failed multiple courses, have learning disabilities, or are struggling readers. The interview responses provided a consistent theme that students must develop self-management skills in order to do well in their courses. Students claim they were accountable for their own learning without a high level of facilitator involvement.

For example, Zoey described the credit recovery process as being "smooth". She explained,

> The course itself is not hard, you just have to do it. After like the first week, you get the hang of the process. You come in, sign in to the computer and start working. Everybody has their own stuff to get done, so it's not a lot of talking.

Zoey explained her need to be redirected at times or motivated by her lab facilitator, Coach W, when she gets off task.

> I know it's on me to finish my course. I know I have to get it done to graduate and most of the time I am focused. I'm trying to pass you know. I tell myself, "I got this" but if I need help, I ask Coach W. I don't need any extra support. I try my best to pass my quizzes. The hardest thing is remembering the content for the quizzes, but the course helps. I take notes while I go through the course. And

> sometimes I have to ask Coach W to unlock a quiz if I fail it. Other than that, I'm good on my own.

Zoey's advice for students needing credit recovery was for them to focus on their work every day. According to her, students need to avoid distractions because they are responsible for what gets done. Staying focused was noted as the most important thing. She said, "If you want to pass, you have to do it!" She also categorized herself as a self-learner and does not hesitate to ask for help if she needs it.

Jackie was enrolled in a Spanish credit recovery course and explained how she likes the format because she is in control of her learning. She stated,

> In a regular class, I get distracted real easy. In a computer class, I can focus on one thing. I come in, sign in, and do my work. When I get bored, I might get off track for a minute, but after a quick mental break, I know I have to get back to it.

She acknowledged how much her focus levels have increased and have surprised herself with her growth. She shared,

> I usually have to be pushed to finish my work. In here though, I just be focused and don't worry about nobody else. When it gets hard, I'll try to keep doing it or ask for help. The internet is my best friend! I don't go to the Spanish teacher here because I don't get along with her. Plus, teachers be having their favorites.

Jackie said the most challenging part of self-managed learning was not having anyone to talk to. The students in the credit recovery lab are enrolled in different courses and the pacing varies for students enrolled in the same course. Her advice to herself was to set a goal and stick with it. She learned to maintain focus to avoid getting behind in the course.

She advised students who may need credit recovery to "do it every day and work on it at home if you have to. It's your credit and your responsibility."

Sierra explained how she sets personal goals during her credit recovery class and how she holds herself accountable for meeting those goals. She shared,

> When I get in the lab, I have to have something to eat. I'm munching on something always. And then I put on my music and go in there; at least 10 quizzes, at least, knock it out. At least look through some of it, like the vocabulary words, so I know what it is. If I don't read the story, I know what the words are. My goal is to finish at least 10 a day.

With this approach, she keeps herself on track to finish the class on time. She admitted that on some days she is not as motivated, blaming it on "senioritis". She also shared that her goal of graduating is not just for her. She was also doing it for her family.

> I'll be the first one ever to graduate; ever. Mama didn't, daddy didn't, step mama didn't, stepdad- nope. Then I'm the only girl out of 7 kids so its like I gotta do it. None of them before me graduated. I'm the 4th child but I still have to be pushed because its hard. My older siblings are gone, so now I'm the oldest at home so I gotta be mature. Gotta go to school, gotta do this, gotta do that, and sometimes I be like; I just don't wanna do it. But my mama be like, girl you better get up and you better go to school cause you not finna be sitting around my house!

When asked about the supports needed in her credit recovery course, she stated,

> I don't need any extra supports. I just need to come. If I had to say one thing, it would be good to have more examples for some of the questions. I know there is no time to waste or I'll be failing again. Graduation is riding on this, this time. I just need to focus. And when I get tired of looking at the computer, I take a break and look through my phone. There's no way I could stare at the computer for 90 minutes.

Nakia explained that she likes to talk during the credit recovery class period but understands that it is her responsibility to successfully complete her courses. She also shared that she has attendance issues and was not interested in credit recovery. She would rather retake the entire initial credit course. However, that was not possible since she needed the credits from all of the other classes on her schedule. She accepts responsibility for her progress and takes ownership for her grades. When asked about her credit recovery experience, she replied,

> I'm not a real motivated learner. Every day I wake up, I be like dang, I really gotta go to school. But the first thing that hit my head is the stage. And I'm trying to walk the stage, so I be like I'ma go to school. But at the same time I need somebody on my back. I need somebody to put me in class because I'll get side tracked. Either if I come to school late or not, like, I come to school late every day. I can never get here on time, but when I do get here, I'm getting my work done. I try to motivate myself, but I got people on my back. When I get in that lab though, I put my headphones on and focus. If I don't have my headphones, then I gotta talk. I'm too close to lose my focus. I wish I would have did it the first time, but that ain't happen. Now its on me to grind it out if I want to graduate.

Carl's experience was consistent with the other students as it pertains to his approach to successfully completing his course. He said, "I go in the lab, do my class, I'm out. I don't do no talking. I straight up go in there, get my mouse, put on my headphones, and get to it." His advice for other students was to come in every day, stay focused, and do the work.

Samuel's approach to completing the material in his credit recovery course included the use of Google to find answers. According to Samuel, the facilitator encouraged students to use the search engine to find answers. Hearing this, my positionality was challenged as I viewed this as a way of violating the integrity of the

program as it was intended. Samuel explained how he arrives to the lab, gets signed in, and splits his screen with Google on one side and the credit recovery content on the other side. He responded,

> The credit recovery process-I don't take time to learn all of the stuff; just the stuff I feel like I need. I have a photographic memory, so I do obtain some of the information, but it's not very clear to me. I still learn it, but I'm not learning it at the same time. I remember it for answer purposes, but I don't retain it. I work at a slow pace but when others are doing work, I follow their lead. Sometimes it is hard for me to focus but I accept responsibility for my behavior. I know I need to work on my attention span; I'm still working on that. It's easy to split my screen to find answers, but if I can't find the answers, I'll reach out to the teacher or my peers or just guess it.

The lab facilitator in Samuel's class was new to the role but not new to the school. Turnover among credit recovery lab facilitators is typically low due to the facilitators serving in other roles at the school (e.g.- athletic coaches, graduation coaches, etc.). In this instance, the new facilitator was an assistant baseball coach and he was assigned to facilitate the lab 2 weeks prior to my interview with Samuel. He did not trust the facilitator to assist and shared,

> I don't know him like that. When the other teacher was in here, I felt like I could talk to them. Not the new guy though. I'm more on my own and I have to separate my time; like scheduling myself. Like I said, I split the screen and answer about 5 questions, then take a break. If I have time, I try to entertain myself. It's pretty simple with the method I'm using to look up answers. I try not to slack, you know; you gotta water the flower in order for it to grow.

For Cole, he considered the credit recovery process a "breeze." Cole was taking credit recovery at the end of the day. He also had a job where he worked every day after school. He explained his experience by stating,

> I try to finish a whole unit every day. Sometimes I finish them in like 30 minutes, but if they're long, I do as much as I can before I have to go to work. If I finish before time is up, I try to do more. I'm pretty much self-motivated and the material is easy. I didn't fail because I was dumb or nothing like that. I can teach myself for the most part. One thing I make sure to do is double check my answers before I submit them.

He did not feel like he needed instructional support to be successful in his credit recovery course. He had an Individualized Education Program (IEP) plan but felt like most questions were common sense. He explained, "Bottom line, you just have to knock it out. Graduation is gonna come so fast, so I have to keep coming or do it from home, or whatever it takes to finish."

Students in credit recovery classrooms need productive learning environments with minimal distractions. In my interviews with students, I learned how they viewed the credit recovery lab environment and how the environment played a part in their success. All of the students acknowledged the high levels of focus that are exhibited in the credit recovery lab setting. Excessive or loud talking was uncommon and students frequently used headphones to listen to videos in the course or music to block out distractions. Zoey shared the following regarding the credit recovery learning environment:

> My class is really quiet. Everybody be on their computers working. Everybody got their own stuff they gotta get done, so it's not a lot of talking going on. In the regular classroom, I failed because I was unorganized and would always lose stuff. I would get distracted easily and I would talk or be on my phone all the time. The regular classroom was not as organized and it was easy to lose focus. In here, you get to focus more and it's not as easy to get distracted.

Jackie explained how she works better in small, focused environments instead of being surrounded by a classroom full of students. Like Zoey, Jackie is easily distracted

and tends to lose focus in the traditional classroom. Jackie stated, “when I’m surrounding by people I know, I get distracted. But since I’m in a computer class, at a computer, I’m not getting distracted and I can focus on one thing.” Jackie was enrolled in a Spanish credit recovery course. Her reason for failing the course in the traditional classroom was described as followed:

> To be honest, the teacher caused me to fail. I didn’t like how she was teaching. And, like, me and her used to just bump heads. And then one day she just took me there and we got into it. Came back and she just failed me. Grade was lower than a 30. If we had a better relationship, I could have passed. It wasn’t the content, it was her against me.

In the credit recovery lab, the lab facilitator is primarily there for support, but does not deliver the content. In many cases, the relationship with the facilitator does not directly impact the progress in the credit recovery course. The credit recovery environment removes the barrier of conscious or implicit bias.

Sierra’s experience in the traditional English classroom in comparison to her credit recovery was similar to Jackie’s experience. She felt like the traditional classroom environment and the teacher were the reasons for her academic struggles. Sierra said:

> I failed English the first time because of the teacher. She was not teaching me. I don’t see how everybody else passed. They were like “it’s easy, it’s easy”. Just because she gives us bookwork, I’m not actually learning nothing, so how did y’all pass? The teaching was terrible.
>
> In credit recovery, I just come in and put on my headphones, then do my work. I know I don’t have time to be wasting since I already failed one time.

Nakia prefers the credit recovery learning environment over the traditional learning environment because it allows her to focus on specific topics and see her progress. She shared, “I’m trying to get it all over with. In here, I get to put on my headphones and focus. I can’t do that in a regular classroom, so I’m always talking and not paying attention.” Nakia failed her courses due to attendance issues and not because of her relationships with her teachers. She explained how she sets a daily goal for assignments to complete in the credit recovery lab. Nakia also stated, “I come to the lab and do what I’m suppose to do. I know exactly what I need to do and Ms. B is always pushing me to finish. I didn’t have teachers pushing me like that in the regular classroom.”

Carl favors the credit recovery learning environment because of the limited interaction within the classroom. He described how the interaction in the lab only consisted of the lab facilitator on an as needed basis. He shared, “when I’m in here, it’s on me to focus on my work. Plus, Ms. B. stays on me to finish. If my classroom teachers stayed on me like that, I probably wouldn’t have failed in the first place.” Ms. B’s interaction and involvement as a lab facilitator was more proactive than the other lab facilitators that I observed. This behavior I observed was supported by the responses the students at her site provided.

Teddy attributed his course failure to the lack of interest that he had in the traditional classroom. He explained how he would horseplay around and not put all his effort into the class. He felt as if his teacher did not like him, so he would be disruptive as a means of retaliation. Now that Teddy is recovering the credit in the credit recovery lab,

the amount of peer interaction and socializing is limited, and the expectations in the lab are completely different. Teddy said,

> I like it a lot better in the lab. It's just me and the computer. Plus, it's always quiet, which can be boring sometimes, but you can get your work done. It's cool because if you need help, there's somebody there to help. We don't have a lot of behavior issues either because everybody is trying to focus on what they need to get done.

The biggest difference between the traditional classroom and the credit recovery lab for Samuel was the social aspect. He explained how socializing during class caused him to fail. He described how the teacher did not have good classroom management, so his primary purpose for going to class was to talk to his best friend. He said, "my best friend was in there and we talked all the time; literally. It was the only class I really wanted to go to because he was in there with me. We would go to the back, sit, and just talk about everything happening during the week. From there, we would just get to going." He mentioned that the same friend was in credit recovery with him, but the learning environment was different. Samuel shared,

> We still talk, but not as much as we did in the regular class. If we start to get out of hand or too far off task, Coach C will get on us. We're both trying to get outta here, so we don't have time to be playing around no more. On the real, it's our last chance unless we want to be back in school next year.

After coding my interview data, I found that students enrolled in credit recovery have varied experiences in the traditional classroom leading up to credit recovery. Although my findings seem upbeat given the negative circumstances that lead students to seek credit recovery, I believe the program has the potential for transformative positive

effects when implemented with fidelity. Credit recovery gives hope to some of the most vulnerable students. Without it, dropout rates would increase as aspirations to graduate would be too farfetched to realistically obtain. In Section III of this chapter, I provide a detailed description of the observations I conducted in the credit recovery labs.

Section III: Observations

In addition to the data collected from the interviews, I conducted 4 lab observations to get a deeper understanding of the credit recovery environments that the students were working in. I was hopeful to see what successes and challenges the students faced in the lab, as well as how they navigated the challenges. The observations helped me to identify commonalities and differences of credit recovery labs from different sites. In the following subsections, I provide a detailed account of what I observed in each credit recovery lab. My foci during each observation was directed toward the physical setting, participants, activities, interactions, conversations, subtle factors, and my own behavior.

Lab Observation 1

My first observation took place at the school with the highest number of 18-year old Black students enrolled in their credit recovery program within the district. The school was Title I and the racial makeup of students were also predominately Black (81%) (see Table 4 in Chapter 3). Sierra, Nakia, and Carl from the interviews attended this school, and Ms. B was the graduation coach/lab facilitator. Upon arriving to the school, I reported to the main office and informed the staff that I was there to visit the credit recovery lab. It was the 1st period of the day and the lab was scheduled to open 2nd

period. Soon after, I was escorted to the credit recovery lab by the lab facilitator prior to students entering. I conducted the observation for 90 minutes, following my observation guide (Appendix B) to capture my experience. The bell rang for students to change class and you could hear the rumble of students rushing to get to their next class. The lab facilitator stood at the door to greet students entering the lab, while speaking to other students who passed by. The tardy bell rang and soon after, the morning announcements began. I observed most students going directly to a computer and logging in without any instructions needed. After 3 minutes of announcements, the instructor requested everyone's attention. She stated the expectations of the day, mentioning one on one conferences that would be taking place to check their individual progress. After explaining, she turned on a radio that quietly played Hip Hop and R&B music in the background.

Physical setting. The physical environment of the lab consisted of blank walls and 2 bulletin boards. One of the bulletin boards included 3 pieces of paper that said "Sophomore Promotion (6 credits needed), Junior Promotion (13 credits needed), Senior Promotion (20 credits needed). The other bulletin board was blank. College flags lined the top of the ceiling on the adjacent wall. There were 29 student computers in the lab arranged in a u-shape, with 6 computers in the middle of the classroom in a straight line. Eleven credit recovery students were in attendance, and all but 4 students sat at computers away from each other. The students focused on their own computers while listening to music from their headphones. The classroom was quiet and focused behaviors were evident. Observing the students and seeing how the facilitator communicated with

them led me to understand the kinds of behavior the setting was designed for. The students received encouragement and motivation from the facilitator. The positive relationship between the facilitator and the students was evident. Based on the student interactions with the facilitator, they genuinely felt like she cared about their progress and reassured them of the success they would achieve for that day. I was amazed by the students' level of respect and trust in the facilitator, as well as their determination to focus on their work for the day.

Participants. The participants in the lab consisted of 11 students and a lab facilitator. Since the school was predominately Black, the racial makeup of the students in the lab was predictable. There were 6 Black males, 4 Black females, and 1 White male in the lab. The lab facilitator was the school's graduation coach and was a Black female. Five of the students were seniors and the other 6 students were underclassmen. All of the students were credit recovery students working to earn graduation credit for courses previously failed.

Activities and interactions. Throughout the observation, all of the students were engaged in their credit recovery course. There was an unspoken, definable sequence of activities that students apparently understood upon entering the lab. Four of the students arrived 20-30 minutes after the start of class but knew exactly what to do upon arrival. They reported directly to a computer, logged in, and began working. During this particular day, students conferenced with the lab facilitator to discuss their progress. There was limited interaction between the students, but several questions were asked to the facilitator about graduation and other questions irrelevant to their credit recovery

course. Students worked on their credit recovery course and participated in one on one conferences until the end of the 90-minute class period.

Conversations. The primary content of the conversations was related to course progress during the one on one conferences, but there were other conversations taking place in regard to graduation, class status, and the upcoming prom. These sidebar conversations were primarily between 3 of the girls and the lab facilitator, but did not seem to distract the other students working on their courses.

The conferences that were being held seemed to be helpful for the students. One of the students stated, “I can’t believe I’m already about to graduate.” The facilitator praised the student by saying, “I know! I remember when I first started working here and had y’all. Yeah, thinking back 4 years ago, like Wow!” The student was excited to hear that his grade was “looking real good; no overdue assignments” before signing his conference document stating that he knew where he stood in his course.

During the middle of the observation, a student randomly asked the facilitator, “when is graduation again?” and she responded, “I think it’s on the 6th. So if that’s the case, for us, we need to be done before Memorial Day because we gotta get grades finalized. School is gonna be crazy with different events and stuff going on.” This conversation sparked other non-related questions from the two other girls who were not as engaged in their course, such as “when is Senior Week”, and “look at my Senior picture keychain” followed by a joke from another student “you look like they took you off the street and threw a gown on you!” The girls were redirected by the facilitator by an announcement to the entire class: “Ok everyone. We’re going to shoot to be done with

our courses by May 22nd. My underclassmen, if you need to take longer, we will still be in school so you have more time." On and off conversations continued between the three girls while other students conferenced with the facilitator. The conversations primarily consisted of senior-related topics and were indicative of the students looking forward to graduating.

Subtle factors. A brief, informal interruption occurred during the observation when a staff member entered the lab to address one of the students. The staff member approached the student, who was a Black male, and asked him about his progress in the course. The staff member joked with the student about him "wanting to be a thug" and mentioned his football aspirations. The staff member also told the student, "I saw you in a rap video online on P. Avenue!" referencing one of the high poverty communities in the city. Before leaving the lab, he told the student, "you better be careful about who you hang around!".

During the observation, I highlighted some of the connotative meaning of words used by the students. Phrases such as "on God," "boop," "ghetto," "hood," "freaking," "a'ight," and "facts" were commonly used. These terms were clearly accepted and seemed to be culturally relevant and understood by the students.

My own behavior. During the observation, I understood that I was as much a part of the scene as the participants. I intentionally established my role as an observer and not an intimate participant. I sat at the entrance of the lab facing the classroom and took notes while the students worked on their courses and attended one on one conferences. My interaction was limited as I only addressed students who said hello or nodded when

making eye contact. While listening in on the conferences, I nodded to the student progress that was being explained.

Lab Observation 2

My second observation took place in the lab of a Title I school that was more diverse than lab observation 1, but was also predominately Black (52%) (see Table 4 in Chapter 3). Teddy and Samuel from the interviews attended this school. When I arrived at the school, I reported to the front office to check in. The front office staff recognized me as a district administrator, so they allowed me to go ahead to the credit recovery lab. My observation was conducted during 1st block, which was scheduled from 8:45-10:15 a.m. I arrived at the lab at 8:35 and the door was locked. There were no students or adults waiting to go in, so I asked a couple of students in the hallway if the room was the credit recovery lab. They confirmed that it was and informed me that the students were in the cafeteria having breakfast and would be there soon. I waited at the door for approximately 5 minutes and a staff member came by to open it. She said the students would be there shortly and invited me in. I entered the lab and sat in the rear of the classroom, next to the lab facilitator's desk. 1st block began at 8:45 and the students and the lab facilitator arrived at 8:50. The students reported directly to the computers, logged in, and began working. The facilitator entered and sat down at her workstation without any interaction with the students. She greeted me to acknowledge my presence but did not provide any instructions to the students or give an overview of the expectations for the day. She did not seem to feel as if she was being observed by me due to my positionality. There was a variance of practice between the facilitator from my first

observation (Ms. B) and her approach to facilitating the lab. I immediately noticed the difference in how the facilitator from the first lab observation set the daily expectation for the students in comparison to the facilitator in lab observation 2. The students seemed to be accustomed to this level of self-accountability for their learning.

Physical setting. In this lab, the walls were completely blank. There were 3 bulletin boards, 2 whiteboards, and 3 mounted chalk boards. 2 of the bulletin boards included flyers with school happenings and motivational posters. All of the whiteboards and chalkboards were blank. The temperature in the lab was unusually warm, so the door was left open along with the lab windows. There were 29 student computers in the lab. 8 computers were aligned in pairs on the right side of the lab and the computers on the left side were arranged in rows of 4. Common to the first lab observation, the students focused on their own computers while listening to music from their headphones. There was no interaction at all in the lab, which created a quiet and focused environment. The students understood the kind of behavior that the setting was designed for. I wondered how the temperature in the lab and the lack of interaction was impacting the overall learning experience for the students.

Participants. There were 10 students and a lab facilitator occupying the lab. The lab facilitator was the school's basketball coach. She was a Black female (she was Coach C who was mentioned in the interviews with Teddy and Samuel). Of the 10 students in attendance, 7 were enrolled in credit recovery and 3 were taking initial credit online courses. The students were spread out across the lab and apparently understood the expectations of the lab based on their actions. The students were quiet, engaged, and self-

sufficient in their work. There were 4 Black males, 3 Black females, 1 White male, 1 White female, and 1 Hispanic male in the lab. Four of the students arrived late to the lab, ranging from 20 minutes to 45 minutes. Late arrivals to the credit recovery labs seemed to be a consistent trend in each lab that I observed. The responses from each facilitator were typically welcoming and then to encourage students to begin their work.

In this instance, the Hispanic male arrived at 9:32 and immediately laid his head down. The facilitator called his name as a gesture to begin working, but the student looked up and laid back down. Several minutes later at 9:42, the facilitator called his name again. This time, the student requested his password. Once received, he logged in but did not start working. At 10:06, the facilitator called his name again and asked, "what are you doing? Falling asleep?" The student responded, "nah" and began working at 10:07, with the class ending at 10:15. The grade classification of the students included 3 seniors and 7 underclassmen.

Activities and interactions. The students were for the most part focused and engaged in their work during the entire lab time. They knew the sequence of logging into their computers to begin their work without direction from the facilitator. The facilitator sat in the back of the classroom with all computer screens in her view. She also used screen monitoring software to see every student's computer from her desk, allowing her to block websites if necessary and ensure the students were on task. There was no interaction between the students and limited interaction between the students and facilitator. The only conversation that took place during the class period was amongst one of the seniors asking the facilitator about graduation and other questions unrelated to their

credit recovery course. Two students were taking notes intensely for their course, 1 student consistently scrolled through his phone throughout the 90-minute class period, 2 other students were using split screens to view their credit recovery course and Google to assist in finding answers. My positionality as a district administrator viewed this practice as cheating and was concerned that it was not addressed by the facilitator, especially in the blatant manner that it was being done. I understood that the students wanted to succeed, but I did not view this as a moral way of doing so.

Conversations. The conversations were limited during my observation, which created a quiet work environment for the students. The few conversations that took place were not related to instruction or course content. The students did not interact with each other and only a couple of students spoke to the facilitator. The telephone in the lab rang 20 minutes into the class period. It was another staff member asking the lab facilitator (who was the girl's basketball coach) about last night's game. The call lasted about 5 minutes when one of the students asked the facilitator if she could call another teacher. The facilitator responded, "she's not in there. I will call her back at the end of the block." The phone rang again 5 minutes later. The facilitator replied, "Ok, I won't…bye." Shortly after, one of the students raised his hand and mumbled. The teacher understood that the student needed one of his assessments unlocked in his credit recovery course so he could advance. The facilitator responded, "Ok, you're unlocked. You just have to refresh your page." Another student asked the facilitator, "Do you have a piece of paper?" She replied, "They got you doing math?" After replying "No", the facilitator said, "Oh, I was about to say. They are getting a little intricate on there." At this time, the

teacher that was to be called at the end of the class period walked by the lab. The facilitator shouted, “There go Ms. T right there! Go catch her. She went to the right hallway.” The student who asked to call her got up from her computer and yelled in the hallway, “Ms. T!” before running to catch her.

Subtle factors. During my observation, there were several unplanned interactions and interruptions. One interruption included the principal and another student. The principal brought a student to the lab because she thought the student was in credit recovery during that class period, but he was not. She told the facilitator, “He cannot go anywhere without me. I’m tired of seeing him do laps around the hall!” The facilitator informed the principal that the student was not in credit recovery during that class period but was scheduled to be there for the next class period. She then took the student to his appropriate 1st block class. Throughout the class period, the custodian was waxing the hallway floor with a loud machine. This did not appear to be disruptive to the students since most of them had on headphones. At one point during the class, a student walked by and stuck her head in the lab, asking “Coach- did y’all win last night?!”, while another student walked in the class and walked back out without saying anything. I could tell from the students behaviors that they were not enjoying their time in the lab. The students were laying their heads down and some were looking at the computers with blank stares. I expected the facilitator to provide instructional support during the observation, which did not happen. I also expected more interaction and guidance to be given to the students. The interaction was almost non-existent as a group and as individuals.

My own behavior. I remained in the back of the classroom during the observation to minimize myself as a distraction. The students did not seem to pay any attention to me as they worked on their courses. There was no eye contact made with me and the students, and they were not looking around to see what I was doing. I did ask the lab facilitator for a breakdown of the grade classification of the students in attendance, to get a better idea of the number of seniors and underclassmen were there. I made notes about the thoughts I was having during the observation. The temperature was very warm in the lab, the noise in the hallway from the floor waxing was distracting, there was no décor in the room, and no assistance was being offered to the students. I thought to myself, if schools are in fact designed based on prison models, this would fit the mold. I began to think how the lab could be enhanced to make it more welcoming and resemble a thriving learning environment. Thoughts of Critical Race Theory and race consciousness crossed my mind as I deliberated whether credit recovery programming has created and is maintaining racial inequality. I reflected and noted the high percentage of Black students in credit recovery across the district in comparison to any other race. I questioned how this racist ideology and structure has attributed to existing oppressive policies and practices that defy racial equity and justice. I wondered why the facilitator was not providing more assistance or addressing the students who were not engaged. I felt like the students did not have a trusting relationship with the facilitator and were left accountable for their own learning. Most of the students were motivated, however, the expectations from the facilitator were inconsistent. It was clear that the students wanted to succeed,

however, observing the students thriving in a focused learning environment was not as apparent as my previous observation at the other site.

Lab Observation 3

The lab in which I conducted my third observation was at a Title I school with a student population of 49% Black and 35% Hispanic. The school operated on a block schedule so the classes were 90-minutes long, which was consistent with the schools from the first two observations. Zoey and Jackie from the interviews attended this school.

I arrived at the school and immediately went to check in at the front office. The office was busy with students, parents, and other staff members. I knew where the credit recovery lab was located, so I signed in and proceeded to the 1st block class. I walked into the lab and 3 students were already there, but there was no lab facilitator. I asked them if the lab facilitator was there today, and one of the students said that he was. It was the first day for the other two students, so they sat there without responding. At this point, it was approximately 8:45 and the class was scheduled to begin at 9:00. While waiting for the facilitator and 1st block students to arrive, I sat at a computer near the entrance and the lab facilitator's desk. The lab facilitator arrived at 8:55 and immediately noticed the two new students. He asked them what they were doing there, and the students looked confused as well. One of the students said that he transferred from another school and the other student said he was just placed in credit recovery. The facilitator then looked at me and greeted me shaking his head from left to right. He conducted his lab in an organized, focused manner and set the tone with one of the new students by saying, "yo, students don't cause problems in this lab and I don't expect that to change with you in here." He

later explained to me that he had a prior relationship with the student and shared that he was a behavioral problem in other classes. The facilitator also shared that it was not uncommon for administrators to place students with behavioral issues with him in the credit recovery lab. I connected this statement to my experience as a Black male teacher. Students who had "behavioral" issues in other classrooms were often sent to my classroom. Usually, the students were Black males and the issues were less often behavioral. Using this as a strategy is better than other punitive actions such as in-school or out of school suspension. In this particular case, the student would be there for the rest of the semester. He explained that for this circumstance, it is best for the student to begin recovering a credit for a core course previously failed than to continue to fail an elective course.

Physical setting. Consistent with the previous labs observed, this lab also contained blank walls, chalk boards, and limited décor. The chalk board behind the lab facilitator had a classroom procedures poster on it, in addition to a few other lab rules and school related announcements taped to it. One of the classroom lights continuously flickered and blinked as if it had a shortage in it. There were 29 student computers in the lab. Five of the computers were in a straight line on the left side of the classroom. Ten of the computers were arranged next to each other on the back side of the classroom. Six of them were grouped together in another section of the classroom, and the remaining 8 were aligned together on the right side of the classroom. In one corner of the classroom, file cabinets and boxes were stacked up beside an old box style tv. Music could be heard

from a few of the students' headphones. All of the students were enrolled in credit recovery except for a student taking African American History for initial credit online.

Participants. There were 18 students and a lab facilitator in the lab. The lab facilitator was the head football coach and was a Black male (Coach W). The racial makeup of students consisted of 8 Black females, 2 Black males, 5 Hispanic males, 1 Hispanic female, and 2 Asian males. There were 8 seniors and 10 underclassmen in the lab during this time. Two students arrived 15 minutes late and 25 minutes late respectively. One of the late students needed her credit recovery account transferred from another school in the district. This account transfer had to take place at the district level, so hearing this, my positionality allowed me to intervene and transfer the account to avoid any delays in access. The students organized themselves at a computer without being assigned to a particular workstation. Most of them sat at a computer alone, but a few students positioned themselves beside another classmate.

Activities and interactions. The majority of students were focused and engaged in their courses. There were sidebar conversations taking place between 2 female students while the other students were working silently with their headphones on. The students understood the expectation of entering the lab, logging in, and starting their work. They would raise their hands to ask questions when needed. Some of the students were taking notes while working, but there were no interactions among the students except for the 2 females sitting beside each other. They consistently laughed and talked to each other throughout the class period. It appeared that one of the girls wanted to focus on her course, but the other girl kept interrupting her through conversation and showing her

things on her phone. Another female student scrolled through her phone while taking breaks. One of the Hispanic males often took breaks from his course to scroll through his phone as well. The interactions between the facilitator consisted mostly of students requesting quizzes to be unlocked, which is an intervention feature built into the credit recovery program.

Conversations. The conversations were primarily initiated by the facilitator with individual students. A couple of students asked, "Coach W, can I go to the bathroom" at the beginning of class. He told them to wait 15-20 minutes until the halls cleared out. The new students were given instructions and guidance on how to login to begin their courses. The facilitator asked one of the new students, "Come here—what's your name?" The student responded and was asked, "why did they put you in here?" He said, "I was acting up in Art, so they told me to come in here." For clarity, I asked the facilitator if the student would be in credit recovery for the remainder of the semester or was this a temporary solution. He explained that it would be for the rest of the semester, even at this point of the semester (February). This made me wonder how the student would eventually earn the elective credit from the Art class that he was removed from. At this point, he was behind an elective credit, in addition to the previous unearned credits needed for graduation.

Several students were called to the facilitator's desk to discuss their progress. This practice may have been a consequence of me being there as I learned in a student interview with Jackie. According to her, the facilitator usually leaves them alone unless someone comes in. One of the students was a new student and he asked her, "what do

you like better, reading or math?" The student said, "reading". The student had failed multiple courses and this was his way to determine which course she would begin first. He said, "Alright, I'm gonna give you a 2 for 1 special. One of them you will be ok with and the other one you won't be ok with. I'm putting you in Spanish 1 and English I. Alright, you cool with that? This way, you don't want to attend summer school right? Right, so you can go ahead and try to knock both of them out. Do your Spanish first and then work on your English. That way, you can get your 2 credits." Facilitators have the discretion to provide guidance to students on which courses they should focus on if they have to recover multiple. He then gave her the website and login credentials for her credit recovery course and told her he would come over there to help her get started. The facilitator called out three other students who raised their hands for their quizzed to be unblocked. He told them, "J- you're good, P- you're good, and Q- you're good." The students then continued to work with their headphones on, maintaining accountability for their own learning without additional guidance from the facilitator.

Subtle factors. The addition of 3 new students was unplanned and unexpected. Based on the student behaviors, they were not excited to be in credit recovery. One of the new students laid down while others had blank stares at the computer. I was surprised that the facilitator allowed the 2 females to talk to each other for the majority of the class period. Although a "No Cell Phones" sign was posted, students ignored this posting and were not addressed for accessing their phones. I expected to see more instructional support for the students and learn about the goals/objectives for the day, but that did not happen during my observation.

My own behavior. I positioned myself on the side of the classroom to face the students while taking my observation notes. The facilitator knew my role as a district administrator and asked me to assist in transferring the new students to their appropriate credit recovery course. While observing, I felt myself getting frustrated at the 2 females constantly talking, knowing the importance of completing their courses. I wondered what their grades were and questioned whether they were off task because they were ahead in their courses or because they felt defeated in being able to complete them.

Lab Observation 4

My fourth observation was conducted at a non-Title I school whose schedule was different than the other observed labs. Cole from the interviews attended this school. The school operated on a traditional schedule which means students attend 6 classes for approximately 1-hour for the entire school year. The previous labs observed were all block schools where students attend 4 classes for a semester with 90-minute class periods. The student population was primarily 42% Black and 35% White. I arrived at the school at 8:35 and the principal was in the hallway greeting students. When he saw me, he welcomed me and introduced me to the lab facilitator who would be in the lab during 1st period. The lab facilitator was a White male and was the basketball coach. I noted that 3 out of the 4 labs I observed during the study utilized athletic coaches as lab facilitators (2 basketball coaches, 1 football coach). The other lab was facilitated by a graduation coach.

The facilitator told me that he had to make a morning announcement and would report to the lab after he was done. I asked him where the lab was located, so he pointed

down the hallway and said turn right to room 301. I went ahead to the lab where several students were already there. When I entered, one of the students asked if I was a substitute. I told them no and informed them that Coach would be there after the announcements. The class was scheduled to last from 8:50-9:50. The announcements were made from 8:50-8:53 and the lab facilitator arrived at 8:55. The students had already logged in and started working before he returned. There was a new student there who waited at a computer until the facilitator returned.

Physical setting. The lab was arranged in a rectangle shape with the facilitator's computer in the middle of the room. There were also 2 tables in the middle of the room without computers, which is where I observed from. The lights were turned off in the lab and the heating system made a constant squeaky noise. There were 28 student computers in the lab with 9 on one side of the room, 4 across the front, 12 on the adjacent side, and 3 across the back. There was no décor on the walls or on the bulletin boards.

Participants. Nineteen students and a lab facilitator were in the lab. Eight students were enrolled in credit recovery and 11 were enrolled in initial credit online courses. This was the most initial credit online enrollments in a lab that I had observed during my study. There were 8 Black females, 4 Black males, 3 White males, 2 White females, 1 Hispanic male, and 1 Hispanic female in the lab. Students sat next to each other, but the overall learning environment was quiet and focused. I noticed one of the Black females constantly talking to the White male student next to her. She was enrolled in credit recovery course and he was enrolled in an initial credit online course. She left class early to check on a schedule adjustment with her school counselor. When she

returned, she was upset and expressed her anger to the lab facilitator that she would be starting a new Art course at this point of the school year since she was missing an elective credit.

Activities and interactions. The majority of students were focused on their computers, quietly working on their courses. Four students were having their own conversations while they were working through their courses. There was a new student there who was unable to login because he was not registered for his online course yet. Since he did not have credentials to begin, he played computer games for the entire period. None of the students asked any instructional questions, but they did have technical questions regarding passwords and quiz resets.

Conversations. The number of conversations was minimal in this lab and the students mainly spoke to the facilitator. I observed 4 students having conversations across the room that did not look to be related to their courses, but the other students were quietly focused on their computers with their headphones on. Early on during the observation, the phone rang and the facilitator answered, “hello…..hey- the game is at UNCG….Ok, perfect!” About halfway through the period, the facilitator asked me, “hey--can you show this student how to submit an assignment to her online teacher for her online course?” I showed the student the proper steps to do this and provided a reference site for the lab facilitator to access in the future.

Subtle factors. During my observation, I learned that the facilitator was new to this role. The lab facilitator that normally serves in the role was out on medical leave and he had only been in the role for 3 weeks. He knew my role as a district administrator and

asked me questions about online learning and asked for best practices in facilitating the lab. It was interesting to see the mixture of students in the lab taking credit recovery and initial credit online courses. There were students in attendance that were behind in graduation credits and others taking AP Calculus and Japanese. Nonetheless, no matter what program they were in (credit recovery or online learning), they were receiving the same minimum level of support, which was concerning to me. I expected to see more interaction with students, motivation, and daily expectations to be communicated. Although this did not occur, I noticed the positive relationship that he had with the students when he did converse with them. He was interested in improving his own practice and learning environment to help students be successful in their credit recovery courses.

My own behavior. While observing, I sat in the middle of the lab at an empty table. My role as an observer did not seem to affect the scene as students focused on their computers. I tried to remain in an observer role as much as possible, but I did have to ask the facilitator how many students were in credit recovery and how many were in initial credit online courses. I also engaged in a conversation with the facilitator about strategies observed from other labs. One thought that I had while observing was the fact that labs with the majority of students taking initial credit students are not much different than labs with the majority taking credit recovery. The biggest difference noted was that students seemed to be more focused on initial credit with a genuine interest in the course.

Section IV: Themes

In this section I present the 4 primary themes that emerged from my analysis of the data. The themes I identified are:

- Theme 1: Credit Recovery Students Have Experienced Academic Challenges in the Past But Want to Succeed
- Theme 2: Credit Recovery Students Are Forced to Become More Accountable for Their Own Learning
- Theme 3: Credit Recovery Students Perform Better in Focused Learning Environments
- Theme 4: The Role of the Lab Facilitator is Limited

Theme 1: Credit Recovery Students Have Experienced Academic Challenges in the Past But Want to Succeed

The prerequisite for enrolling in credit recovery is to have previously failed the initial credit course in which students are recovering. This indicates that each student had experienced an academic challenge in the past. During my interviews, I learned that these past challenges did not take away from the students' desire to succeed. They all had their own reasons for previously failing, but they also hoped to graduate high school, go to college, or enter the workforce. For many of the students, making their families proud was a driving force for them to finish high school. Zoey and Jackie attributed their academic challenges to being immature, not turning in assignments, and becoming easily distracted by classmates. Sierra attributed her academic challenges to the uncontrolled classroom environment and incompetent teachers. Nakia and Carl's academic challenges derived from attendance issues. Carl shared that he began hanging with the wrong crowd, and like Cole, felt as if his teachers did not care about him being there. Teddy had a lack

of interest in school which attributed to his outlandish behavior in the classroom, causing him to be suspended in and out of school. Samuel explained that his sole purpose of attending school was to socialize. He admitted to skipping class or going to class just to talk to his friends. Although their reasons for failing courses varied, they shared one common factor—they were all working to earn their required credits to graduate.

While interviewing the students, I asked them about their post-graduation plans. Listening to them talk about their goals concerned me, as the majority had not taken the necessary steps to pursue the stated goals. At the time of the interviews, there were only 4 months remaining in the school year. Of the eight students interviewed, Jackie was the only one who had been accepted to college. I wondered if the school counselors and other stakeholders had written the students off based on their past academic challenges. I recall the students' desires to go to college, becoming artist and business owners, and pursuing careers in engineering. It was evident that they want to be successful beyond high school but did not seem to have the proper guidance to pursue those goals.

Theme 2: Credit Recovery Students Are Forced to Become More Accountable for Their Own Learning

Students enrolled in credit recovery courses are made responsible for both their own failure and success. They are forced to become more accountable for their own learning by using the credit recovery computer software. This is concerning for students who are frequently identified as vulnerable or at-risk. Based on the responses from the interviews I conducted, the focus for most students was not to learn the content but simply complete the course to earn their graduation credit. The long-term impact of this

approach would only serve as a setback of their knowledge as they leave high school and experience higher levels of accountability as citizens.

In the credit recovery environment, a focus exists on student ownership of learning as evidenced through my data collection. Students are responsible for completing self-paced modules through a digital curriculum with minimal assistance from a teacher. From a systemic lens, credit recovery is viewed as an opportunity for students to earn graduation credit in a condensed timeframe, reducing the probability of dropping out. However, without the proper supports in place, the lab setting may prove to be too challenging. The credit recovery lab setting is designed to be self-paced and student-centered. Student-centered learning is different than teacher-centric instruction since it focuses on the individual student and the instructional processes to support a student-centric learning cycle (Glowa, 2016). Without a content specific teacher in the lab, credit recovery students must advance at a pace that allows them to master concepts on their own, access a variety of resources, and demonstrate their knowledge with limited interaction. It is critical for students to set short-term goals to reach their long-term goal of earning graduation credit.

During my interviews, participants described their daily routine of taking online course credit and their sense of engagement in the process. Participants described logging on to the website, selecting a class, and working through modules. Several of the participants complained of becoming “locked out” of the software after wrongly answering questions or getting stuck during assignments. During these times, they would signal to the lab facilitator to unlock their lesson. If they did not speak up, they could

easily remain “stuck” in the same place within the unit for the entire class period. The participants had to balance isolation, judgment, and lack of assistance while they worked on their courses. Their interview responses revealed how they were able to successfully complete their online courses despite their previous academic challenges.

Theme 3: Credit Recovery Students Perform Better in Focused Learning Environments

The credit recovery lab environment was similar in each of the labs that I observed. Students knew the routine of logging into the computer and beginning their work. All of the labs were quiet and functioned without disruption, aside from the minimal sidebar conversations. Students knew what they needed to do to complete their courses. While interviewing the students, they shared their reasons for previously failing as described in Theme 1. They earned failing grades in their previous traditional courses due to absences, lack of focus, and/or lack of effort. Failure was caused by various conflicts, including struggles with teachers, the learning environment, obstacles facing their home life, and negative influence and distractions from peers. Many of their reasons for failing in the traditional setting were removed in the credit recovery environment. The credit recovery learning environment allowed students to specifically focus on their course, and as seniors, they had to demonstrate a higher level of maturity as this was their last chance to graduate with their cohort. One student explained, “This is my last option, so it’s like I’m either going to learn it or I don’t graduate! With that being said I’m going to do what I need to do to finish my stuff.”

The labs I observed were well managed from a classroom management standpoint, so students were not easily distracted by classmates. There was limited

interaction between the students during class, so socializing with friends was not a disturbing factor. Although the lab facilitators were present, learning took place on the computer, which removed the barrier of listening to "incompetent teachers" as described by the students. Attendance was the responsibility of the student and they could work on the course outside of school if they were absent. The fact that this was their last chance made a difference in their approach to coming to class, and the focused environment itself attributed to their increased progress in the credit recovery courses.

Theme 4: The Role of the Lab Facilitator is Limited

It is important for credit recovery lab facilitators to establish clear classroom expectations at the beginning of the course as their role is limited when it pertains to their daily involvement and interaction. During my observations, I observed facilitators providing support on an as-needed basis. Students found success without much facilitator involvement, and it was not uncommon for facilitators to remain stationary at their computer until a student requested help. This behavior was observed in all 4 lab observations and explained by the students during the interview. Progress check-ins were offered by two of the facilitators during my observations. One student explained that the check-ins were conducted because the facilitator knew that I would be there observing. In each lab, I observed the facilitators reactively assisting students as opposed to providing proactive support. The comments described in the student interviews, in addition to my observation data support this theme. Students felt that tools such as Google and their notes from the credit recovery course were enough for them to successfully complete their course. The students shared that the facilitators are primarily needed to support them

on an as-needed basis. Another important role of the facilitator was to establish rules to limit distractions that may negatively influence the focused learning environment. During my interview with Jackie, she asserted, “You’re really by yourself. The facilitator is just there to be there. I’m literally on my own. When people come in, then he’s on you, but usually he don’t stay on us like that.” She also shared, “For the most part, I feel like I can pass my course without any extra support. Basically, I don’t have any support. As long as I got Google and translator and my notebook; I’m straight.”

Sierra did not feel as if her lab facilitator could help with the content being taught from the computer. She said, “All you’re really doing is learning from the computer. Even if I wasn’t on my own and needed help from Ms. B (teacher), she really can’t help unless she read through the whole course.” Carl and Sierra were in the same credit recovery lab. He expressed his level of needed support from the facilitator as follows: “Sometimes I need Ms. B to help me, but other than that, I’m straight on my own. I don’t need extra support to learn the material. It’s not hard. It’s just a matter of doing it.”

When I interviewed Cole, his experience was consistent with the other students in regard to the limited role of the facilitator. He communicated,

> You don’t need anybody to help you because you can use the internet. It’s an advantage and disadvantage to learning. I know it’s bad and that we should rely more on our brains, but it’s there. I feel sorry for the kids that are coming up now. They’re always on their phones, and video games, and doing all this other stuff. The Internet dumbs us down, but can be helpful at the same time.

At various times during my observations in each lab, a few of the students were scrolling through their phones without that behavior being addressed by the facilitator for extended

periods of time (>10 minutes). I would have expected the facilitator to address this as a distraction, however, it was not. In these instances, the facilitator behavior supports Theme 4- The Role of the Lab Facilitator is Limited. I did not observe any offerings of grade boosting incentives, extended learning opportunities before or after school, or other forms of extrinsic motivation in any of the labs, which further support this theme.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings from the student interviews and lab observations that were conducted for my study. I connected the actions and responses of the students enrolled in credit recovery to the 4 themes that emerged. I found that credit recovery students have experienced academic challenges in the past but want to succeed, they are becoming more accountable for their own learning, and they perform better in focused learning environments. I also found that lab facilitator roles are limited. I have provided readers with the evidence for each theme, along with descriptions of my observations in the credit recovery labs.

In Chapter V, I take the findings and analyze them further by connecting them to the original research question of this study. I present how the findings relate to the established literature in Chapter II, and provide implications and recommendations based on the findings of my study. I conclude with a reflection on what I learned by doing this dissertation.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I designed this study in order to take an in-depth look at the experiences of Black students enrolled in credit recovery programs. As part of the study, I wanted to answer the following primary research and sub-questions:

1. What are Black students' experiences in credit recovery programs?
    a. What do participating students attribute their success to?
    b. What barriers discourage students' efforts to complete credit recovery courses?

To answer these questions, I employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the experiences of 8 students from various schools within the same district. All the students were at least 18 years old, racially categorized as Black, and enrolled in credit recovery. The study included semi-structured interviews and observations.

In this chapter, I begin by answering the research question and sub-questions with a reference to my findings. As a means of analysis, I connect my findings to the literature I reviewed earlier in the dissertation. In particular, I revisit and apply my theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory as an interpretive lens with which to more deeply understand the meanings of my findings. I then share insights for professional practice that are based on my research and the nature of my study. These insights may serve as helpful guidance for students enrolled in credit recovery and lab facilitators overseeing

the programs. I also offer recommendations for future research that may emerge from my study. Lastly, I conclude the chapter with a personal reflection on the study.

Analysis

In this section, I answer my research question and sub-questions. I turn now to my overall research question.

What Are Black Students' Experiences in Credit Recovery Programs?

In my interviews with credit recovery students, I discovered how their learning experiences varied based on different factors including teacher relationships, home/family responsibilities, self-motivation, and social influence from peers. After using coding to analyze the data from my interviews and observations, I was able to identify 4 main themes that were relevant to my overall question. The themes were:

1. Credit Recovery Students Have Experienced Academic Challenges in the Past But Want to Succeed
2. Credit Recovery Students Are Forced to Become More Accountable for Their Own Learning
3. Credit Recovery Students Perform Better in Focused Learning Environments
4. The Role of the Lab Facilitator is Limited

Credit recovery students have experienced academic challenges in the past but want to succeed. Each student that I interviewed shared a common goal of wanting to graduate. During the interviews, I could sense their desire to please their families and school communities by graduating and moving on as productive citizens. They all had their reasons as to why they experienced academic challenges in the past but that did not

deter their post-secondary ambitions. Each student had an idea of what life would look like after high school; however, they did not have a solid plan in place to achieve the stated goals. They shared ideas of going to college, working with computers, venturing into the music industry, and even starting their own businesses.

Listening to their responses, I questioned whether the credit recovery facilitator or school counselor had given them proper guidance on their options after high school. Dunning-Lozano (2016) found that credit recovery programs fail to provide the necessary resources students need to matriculate to college, even as students were led to believe they were meeting the necessary college requirements. The academic challenges that the students faced in the past could serve as a roadblock, particularly for those who expressed interest in attending a four-year college. The students expressed how credit recovery had given them hope to graduate, while minimizing their chances of dropping out. Powell (2018) noted how credit recovery is intended to decrease high-school dropout rates and increase graduation rates for academically vulnerable students. The students felt like their academic challenges in the past had given them a negative stereotype in the opinions of peers and staff. Negative stereotypes may affect attitudes toward education as students can take on the persona as the hard-to-engage uninterested learner (Livingston & Nahimana, 2006). Of the 4 sites observed, there was a low level of trust between the students and the facilitators at all but 1 lab. At that particular lab, the students had established a positive relationship with the facilitator and her actions demonstrated her level of interest in seeing the students succeed. One student commented: “Ms. B is always pushing me to finish. I didn’t have teachers pushing me like that in the regular

classroom." Another student made a similar statement: "Ms. B. stays on me to finish. If my classroom teachers stayed on me like that, I probably wouldn't have failed in the first place."

The resources made available to students during my observations were limited, but this did not stop them from working on their courses. There were limited resources and interactions in the classroom, but the students used what they had (i.e. Google) to find answers and move on toward earning their credit. My observations in most of the labs supported Powell's (2018) research. Powell indicates credit recovery programs disadvantage many students of color by failing to provide the necessary resources needed to succeed. Although the resources and supports were limited for the students, they demonstrated remarkable effort in completing their credit recovery courses to earn their graduation credit.

Credit recovery students are forced to become more accountable for their own learning. Credit recovery students are forced to become more accountable for their own learning due to the self-paced nature of the courses. Throughout my data collection, I wondered how students who had already failed the course were expected to self-pace themselves without a content specific teacher providing instructional support. Dunning-Lozano (2016) indicates evidence that credit recovery programs operate as dumping grounds for students of color that school administrators have difficulty placing, which undermines the purpose of the program and further exacerbates existing racial inequities. I often questioned if the students were dumped in the program to be left accountable for their own progress. Based on the interviews and observations, the students did not appear

to have a problem with the level of accountability that was placed on them, although some of them were more strategic with their approaches. Several students set daily personal goals, while others simply Googled answers. I recall one student's comment regarding his strategy to complete his course. He stated,

> I try to finish a whole unit every day. Sometimes I finish them in like 30 minutes, but if they're long, I do as much as I can before I have to go to work. If I finish before time is up, I try to do more. I'm pretty much self-motivated and the material is easy. I didn't fail because I was dumb or nothing like that. I can teach myself for the most part. One thing I make sure to do is double check my answers before I submit them.

I understood the students' ultimate goal was to earn the credit for graduation by any means necessary. However, it was disheartening to learn how some of them handled this self-accountable approach to learning. For example, Samuel explained,

> I don't take time to learn all of the stuff; just the stuff I feel like I need. I have a photographic memory, so I do obtain some of the information, but it's not very clear to me. I still learn it, but I'm not learning it at the same time. I remember it for answer purposes, but I don't retain it. I work at a slow pace but when others are doing work, I follow their lead. Sometimes it is hard for me to focus but I accept responsibility for my behavior. I know I need to work on my attention span; I'm still working on that. It's easy to split my screen to find answers (on Google).

When students are enrolled in a credit recovery course, it is their responsibility to complete the course. This could be extremely challenging for students with individualized education plans (IEP), reading struggles, or language barriers. Literature from Viano (2018) specifies how students who fail multiple courses are likely to have skill deficits that are not isolated to the courses they fail. For instance, if credit recovery

students are more likely to be poor readers, then online learning will be more difficult for those students who might be learning almost exclusively through a text-heavy online platform. Although lab facilitators are present, they often lack the content knowledge to assist the students directly. During my observations, there were no content-specific teachers visiting the labs to provide support, which leaves the students in a disadvantaged position to learn directly from the computer using their own strategies. Some educators may question how a credit recovery program can fill learning gaps without the need for a highly qualified teacher. Viano (2018) compares credit recovery courses to remedial courses since the students have been exposed to the material before. Using this comparison, many students are able to recall previously taught concepts that do not require new learning.

Credit recovery students perform better in focused learning environments. Scott (2017) advocates for a particular type of learning environment for Black students. He mentions that "traditional classrooms are not meeting the needs of Black students" (p. 25). In comparison to traditional classrooms, credit recovery labs have smaller class sizes, less interaction between students, and include some of the most vulnerable students in the school. Each lab that I observed was quiet, had limited décor, and the students were focused on their computers with their headphones on while working on their credit recovery courses. During my interviews, I asked students about their reasons for failing the initial credit course in the traditional classroom. I recall Zoey's response as followed:

> My class is really quiet. Everybody be on their computers working. Everybody got their own stuff they gotta get done, so it's not a lot of talking going on. In the regular classroom, I failed because I was unorganized and would always lose

> stuff. I would get distracted easily and I would talk or be on my phone all the time. The regular classroom was not as organized and it was easy to lose focus. In here, you get to focus more and it's not as easy to get distracted.

Jackie's response was similar: "In a regular class, I get distracted real easy. In a computer class (credit recovery), I can focus on one thing. I come in, sign in, and do my work." For credit recovery students, the learning environment is critical for success. Many of their reasons for failing in the traditional classroom were minimized in the credit recovery environment, including peer distractions, disengagement, and defiant relationships with the teacher. In this learning environment, the focus levels must increase since it is the last chance to earn course credit for many of them.

There is one critical element missing from the credit recovery learning environment that many students feel is the reason for their failure; the traditional classroom teacher. Research has demonstrated that teachers are the single most vital factor in school success for students because teachers influence academic progression (Kenyatta, 2012). The struggles that students experienced with their traditional classroom teachers were removed in the credit recovery environment due to the content being delivered digitally. Many of the students explained how the teacher in the traditional learning environment played a key role in their course failure. After hearing this explanation from multiple students, I began to wonder how often inequality in the traditional learning environment negatively impacts Black students, resulting in failure and credit recovery. I also questioned how much teacher bias played in the students' lack of success in the traditional learning environment. I recall student responses such as:

> (Sierra)- The class, it wasn't that it was hard, but the teacher wasn't teaching us at all. She was just giving us book work; book work. I failed English the first time because of the teacher. She was not teaching me. I don't see how everybody else passed. Just because she gives us bookwork, I'm not actually learning nothing, so how did y'all pass? The teaching was terrible.
>
> (Cole)- I don't feel the teacher wanted me there.
>
> (Jackie)- I don't go to the Spanish teacher here because I don't get along with her. Plus, teachers be having their favorites. To be honest, the teacher caused me to fail. I didn't like how she was teaching. And, like, me and her used to just bump heads. And then one day she just took me there and we got into it. Came back and she just failed me. Grade was lower than a 30. If we had a better relationship, I could have passed. It wasn't the content, it was her against me.
>
> (Teddy)- I didn't feel like the teacher liked me, so I would be disruptive just to retaliate.

Unfortunately, even the most dedicated and well-meaning teachers hold stereotypes and beliefs that affect their students. These beliefs can be as harmful as they are inevitable when unexamined. Noguera (2003) reports that if students do not believe that their teachers care about them, the likelihood that they will succeed academically is very low. For Black students, positive student-teacher relationships are an important factor in their academic success. Research indicates that students who have a positive relationship with their teachers are more likely to have positive school outcomes. Based on the responses from the students, this positive relationship was nonexistent and contributed to their lack of success in the initial credit class.

The role of the lab facilitator is limited. Through my observations, I found the lab facilitator's role to be limited as it pertained to the progress of students in credit recovery. In my role as a district administrator overseeing the credit recovery program, our professional learning efforts with lab facilitators did not appear to resonate in the

practices of facilitators in the credit recovery lab. During professional learning sessions, we introduced strategies for lab facilitators to implement in the credit recovery labs. The strategies would help lab facilitators function similar to classroom teachers and included daily check-ins, progress monitoring, establishing learning goals, note taking, and the use of classroom incentives to motivate students. Evidence from the most successful credit recovery programs show that motivation can be a powerful intervention to improve outcomes for struggling students (Nellie Mae Education Foundation, 2017). However, based on my observations, these strategies were rarely demonstrated. The limited involvement of the lab facilitators was surprising, especially with the student population working on credit recovery. Credit recovery programs are designed to provide a pathway for high school students who have a history of course failure and help them avoid falling further behind in school (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The students perception of the lab facilitators' involvement supports this analysis. During my interview with Jackie, she shared, "You're really by yourself. The facilitator is just there to be there. I'm literally on my own. When people come in, then he's on you, but usually he don't stay on us like that." Sierra explained, "All you're really doing is learning from the computer. Even if I wasn't on my own and needed help from Ms. B (teacher), she really can't help unless she read through the whole course." Carl shared that he did not need extra support from the facilitator to learn the material. For him, completing the material was not hard, it was just a matter of doing it. Cole made a statement supporting this analysis, saying: "You don't need anybody to help you because you can use the internet. It's an advantage and disadvantage to learning." Evidence from my interviews and observations indicate

that students in credit recovery courses are likely to complete their courses on their own with limited involvement from the lab facilitator.

I turn now to my first sub-question.

To What Do Participating Students Attribute Their Success?

As noted by Holland (2014), it is important for Black students to express what they are currently experiencing and how the credit recovery program could possibly affect their future. All the students in the study shared strategies and reasons that help them successfully complete their credit recovery courses to earn the necessary graduation credit. They understood the implications that credit recovery had on their futures, which served as motivation that attributed to their success. Students credited their success in credit recovery to using graduation as motivation, increasing their levels of focus, and setting daily goals to achieve.

The students' desire to graduate was the most common factor mentioned during my interviews with them. While about 88% of White high school students graduate within four years, only 75% of Black and 78% of Hispanic high school students graduate on time (Rickles, Heppen, Allensworth, Sorensen, & Walters, 2018). During my interview with Teddy, he shared his thoughts about dropping out: "In all honesty, before taking credit recovery I was thinking about dropping out because I didn't think I would make it. Apparently, my dad dropped out and I didn't want to follow those same footsteps."

Nakia had actually dropped out before but returned to school. She opened up to tell me that she would have dropped out for good without credit recovery, and the

program gave her hope of earning her diploma. She made a genuine statement about her desire to graduate, explaining:

> I'm here to graduate. But I know I need to graduate because I want to be something in life and not be how people label me as. Honestly, I don't feel like I need this class in life, I just need it to graduate so I'm not really focusing on learning the stuff in the course. I'm just going through it to get my credit to graduate.

In Nakia's case, credit recovery was serving the purpose as designed, which was to decrease high-school dropout rates and increase graduation rates for academically vulnerable students (Powell, 2018). Zoey described her troubled past in school and how she felt like graduating would make up for her shortcomings, as she planned to go to cosmetology school. Graduating was also Samuel's primary motivator that he attributed to his success in credit recovery. His main goal was to earn his diploma so he would not be "stuck in the streets." He explained, "When I get my diploma, I may not be able to get a fancy job, but at least I'll have something and can help (family) out a little bit." The participating students in the study were 18 years old and knew it was their last chance to graduate with their cohort. Sierra claimed, "This is my last chance, so I have to pass it so I can graduate in June!" During my observations, the main topic of discussion in several labs was about graduation. I recall one student making the comment, "I can't believe I'm already about to graduate" and another asking, "when is graduation again?" Every student that I interviewed attributed their success in credit recovery to their desire to graduate and become productive citizens.

Students also attributed their success in credit recovery to their increased levels of focus. In many instances, students failed the initial credit course during their Junior, Sophomore, or even Freshman years. Since then, their maturity levels increased and the possibility of graduating was one step closer. Maturity plays a major role in student success (How Students' Maturity Levels Impact Learning, 2016). The students in the study were high school seniors and legally classified as adults (18 years and older). They demonstrated increased levels of focus with their approach in completing their credit recovery courses, understood the effects of not completing them, and were able to associate what they were doing now with the results of what could happen later. Samuel explained how he began to take school seriously as he approached his senior year. He said, “As I got older, I started taking school serious. I think school should be done differently so students are not so disconnected. I failed my math class because my friends were in there and it was straight up boring.”

Zoey simply stated, “If you want to pass, you have to do it!” and Jackie acknowledged how much her focus levels had increased by stating, “I usually have to be pushed to finish my work. In here though, I just be focused and don’t worry about nobody else. When it gets hard, I’ll try to keep doing it or ask for help. The internet is my best friend!” Jackie’s advice was to work on the course every day, even at home if you have to. She recognized how much accountability was riding on her efforts and knew it was her responsibility to finish her course. Nakia made similar comments in reference to her increased levels of focus. She explained how she puts her headphones on to focus. She commented, “I’m too close to lose my focus. I wish I would have did it the first time,

but that ain't happen. Now it's on me to grind it out if I want to graduate." Sierra expressed how she did not have time to waste since she already failed the initial credit course one time before. Her acknowledgement of the previously failed course and her previous problems with time management demonstrated her increased level of focus. Carl attributed his success to a simple formula: come to the lab every day, stay focused, and do the work!

Participating students attributed their success to daily goal setting as well. In schools and credit recovery labs, students' self-esteem can be influenced by negative prevalent perceptions (Livingston & Nahimana, 2006). To counter this response to self-esteem deflation, students were able to set and meet daily progress goals as personal achievements. The content in a credit recovery course may seem overwhelming for students, so "chunking" it allows them to gain a sense of accomplishment. Content chunking is the strategy of breaking up content into shorter pieces of information that are more manageable and easier to process. For example, Sierra's goal was to complete at least 10 quizzes per day. She holds herself accountable for meeting that goal and is able to do more if time permits. Jackie's advice to herself was to set a goal and stick with it. She aimed to complete identified sections of her course on a daily basis. Cole's approach was to finish an entire unit each day. He described his approach:

> I try to finish a whole unit every day. Sometimes I finish them in like 30 minutes, but if they're long, I do as much as I can before I have to go to work. If I finish before time is up, I try to do more. One thing I make sure to do is double check my answers before I submit them.

Zoey's method of goal-setting consisted of a process instead of daily objectives. The establishment of a routine worked best for her opposed to setting everyday goals. She described her process as "smooth", and it consisted of arriving to the lab, signing in, and beginning her work. She explained that everyone has their own work to get done, so there is not a lot of disruptions occurring. According to Zoey, the need to avoid distractions was important since she is responsible for what gets done in her course. The goals that each student sets for themselves contributes to their progress, self-esteem, and overall success in the credit recovery course.

I now discuss my final sub-question.

What Barriers Discourage Students' Efforts to Complete Credit Recovery Courses?

A barrier to learning is anything that prevents learners from fully engaging in learning. For example, the students in my study were at-risk as characterized by The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL, 2015). The Association considers students at-risk if they had one or more of the following characteristics:

- Low socioeconomic status
- From a single parent family
- An older sibling dropped out of school
- The student had changed schools two or more times
- Had average grades of "C" or lower from sixth to eighth grade
- Repeated a grade

Being labeled at-risk could be viewed as a barrier in itself. However, the students in the study described computer fatigue as a barrier as well as boredom and isolation. Both of

the described barriers discouraged students' efforts in completing their credit recovery courses.

Online credit recovery courses, which have helped boost graduation rates nationally, have grown quickly from a barely known concept a decade ago to one of the biggest and most controversial new trends in education (Rickles et al., 2018). Since the courses are delivered online, students are required to work solely on the computer to complete their courses. According to the iNACOL (2015), more than 75% of school districts use blended and online learning for expanded course offerings and credit recovery. This can become problematic for many students, especially at schools that operate on a 90-minute block schedule. Three of the four sites that I observed were on block schedules, and the other site was on a traditional schedule with 60-minute periods. During my interviews, students explained how they sometimes "zone out" after staring at the computer for so long. Sierra also described how she transitions from one screen to the next as she goes from the computer to her phone to take breaks. She shared, "When I get tired of looking at the computer, I take a break and look through my phone. There's no way I could stare at the computer for 90 minutes!" Samuel's approach to circumventing computer fatigue is to answer a set number of questions, then take a break. He said that he tries to entertain himself by looking at other sites if he has time, just to break away from the digital content. During my observations, I noticed several students using their phones to take mental breaks. Others laid their heads down, while some stared at the screen with glazed eyes.

In contrast to the traditional classroom, the credit recovery learning environment is designed for individual focus and limited interaction with other students. There is limited interpersonal oral communication and the labs are typically quiet throughout the entire class period. This environment can create boredom for many students. Jackie's approach to addressing boredom was mentioned in my interview with her. She stated, "When I get bored, I might get off track for a minute, but after a quick mental break, I know I have to get back to it." I observed the impact of boredom in the credit recovery lab, which resulted in multiple requests for bathroom breaks, cell phone scrolling, irrelevant Internet searches, and students taking naps for extended periods of time. In the traditional classroom, boredom could result in class disruption, but that was not the case in the labs that I observed. Instead, lab facilitators allowed students to remain off task as long as they were quiet. A combination of extended class periods and lengthy access to digital content can be overwhelming for students. This is a recipe for students to lose focus, especially with the barriers to social interaction that are in place in the labs.

Due to the limited interaction with the lab facilitator and peers, students were constantly working in isolation. The isolation created a barrier in communication between the students and the facilitator. Samuel explained his relationship with his facilitator as followed, "I don't trust him to assist because I don't know him like that. When the other teacher was in here, I felt like I could talk to them. Not the new guy though. I'm more on my own and I have to separate my time; like scheduling myself." This level of isolation was evident at three of the four sites observed. Students were on their own from the time they arrived until the bell rang to leave. Jackie said the most challenging part of learning

in the credit recovery environment was not having anyone to talk to. It is difficult to have dialogue that is relevant to a particular course since the students are in different grade levels and are recovering different courses. The various level of pacing is another factor that makes discussions challenging. Other barriers were mentioned that were not as consistent among the participating students. They included personal barriers, cultural barriers, and a lack of sense of community.

Revisiting the Theoretical Framework

In Chapter I, I explained how my study was built on the foundation of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Scholars vary in their delineation of CRT, but all agree that racism is the status quo in the United States (McGilvrey, 2012). I chose to use the lens of CRT to focus my research on Black students who were finishing their final semester of high school. In this section, I reconnect my findings as they relate to the tenets of CRT to increase the depth of understanding of my findings. Importantly, I was able to incorporate the voice of Black students to shed light on their experiences in the credit recovery programs as mentioned in Chapter I. I was also able to include the CRT tenet of counter storytelling as I revisited the theoretical framework. CRT defines counter stories as stories that aim to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Only by soliciting and listening to the counter stories of the participants did I realize that the timing of credit recovery enrollment (i.e. Senior year), the environment, and the understood purpose of earning graduation credit are the major factors in determining success or failure of Black students. CRT values counter stories because they give voice to those who are

disenfranchised. All of the participants emphasized the difference in the way traditional classrooms impacted their learning in comparison to the credit recovery setting.

CRT rejects the idea that schools have eliminated racism. In fact, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) describe racism as "ordinary" and "not aberrational" (p. 7). While observing the credit recovery labs, I noticed an unbalanced number of Black students enrolled in the program, which contributed to my initial interest in researching this area. The findings of my study led me to question the instructional strategies that are being utilized in traditional classrooms, and whether credit recovery is an effective learning solution for Black students who previously failed in the traditional setting. I conclude that credit recovery is not ideal but is better than not having anything at all. Table 5 features the connections between my study's research question, themes, CRT tenets, and findings.

Table 6

Connections: Themes, CRT Tenets, and Evidence from the Data

Research Questions	**Themes**	**CRT Tenet**	**Evidence from the Data**
What are Black students' experiences in credit recovery programs?	Theme 1: Credit Recovery Students Have Experienced Academic Challenges in the Past But Want to Succeed	Racism is the Norm Participants reported being stereotyped by teachers in the traditional classroom, which contributed to their negative relationships with teachers and initial academic challenges.	Although the students' experienced academic challenges in the past, it did not take away from their desire to succeed. They all expressed their reasons for previously failing, but they also hoped to graduate high school, go to college, or enter the workforce to become productive citizens.
What are Black students' experiences in credit recovery programs?	Theme 2: Credit Recovery Students Are Forced to Become More Accountable for Their Own Learning Theme 4: The Role of the Lab Facilitator is Limited	Interest Convergence On one hand, school districts view credit recovery as an equitable solution to benefit students. On the other hand, our most vulnerable students are forced to become more accountable for learning that did not occur in the traditional classroom with limited involvement from a highly qualified instructor.	The focus for most of the participants was not to learn the content but simply complete the course to graduate. The long-term impact of this approach would only serve as a setback of their knowledge as they leave high school and experience higher levels of accountability as citizens.
What are Black students' experiences in credit recovery programs?	Theme 3: Credit Recovery Students Perform Better in Focused Learning Environments	Counterstories Are Important Students described how their failure was caused by various conflicts, including struggles with teachers, the learning environment, obstacles facing their home life, and negative influence and distractions from peers.	Many of the explained reasons for failing in the traditional classroom were removed in the credit recovery environment.

Implications

This study allowed me to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Black students enrolled in credit recovery programs. The study was student-focused and I was interested in the strategies students used to navigate the credit recovery process. Credit recovery students may be described as "at-risk" since they have failed to achieve basic proficiency in key subjects or have exhibited behaviors that can lead to failure and/or dropping out of school. Although graduation rates are reaching record highs, over half a million students still drop out of high school each year (U.S. Department of Education 2015). This statistic was supported in the interviews that I conducted as several students expressed their thoughts of dropping out. Fortunately, many of the participants were able to leverage credit recovery to keep their graduation hopes alive. It was pleasing to know that for some students, the credit recovery program was serving its purpose of offering an alternative method of earning graduation credit. Credit recovery programs that work as they are intended conflicts with Dunning-Lozano's (2016) evidence that credit recovery programs operate as dumping grounds for students of color, which undermines the purpose of the program and further exacerbates existing racial inequities. I believe there are implications of these findings in relation to students in credit recovery programs and lab facilitators overseeing credit recovery programs. I discuss these implications in the following sections.

Students

In the study, I believe the students were appreciative of the opportunity to share their experiences during the scheduled interviews. They opened up more than I had

expected they would, and I felt like they were genuine in their responses. There were several key points and strategies that other credit recovery students could benefit from as they complete their credit recovery courses. Participating students in my study used graduation as their primary motivation to complete their courses. The desired goal of graduation fueled the motivation of the students to engage in resilient, self-developed strategies to ultimately complete their coursework. They consistently explained how important it was to set a routine and stay focused. Goal setting was another important implication that students need to consider in order to be successful in credit recovery. The participants associated with this study focused on their goals and were self-motivated not to make the same mistakes that they exhibited in their initial credit courses. Students must be strategic in working on their course to avoid experiencing computer fatigue, becoming bored or getting off task, and feeling isolated in the self-paced learning environment.

The results of this study can help prepare future students with an idea of what the credit recovery learning environment looks like, what the expectations are, and how it can ultimately benefit them. This implies that participating students possessed a motivational skill set that should be emphasized to other learners entering the online credit recovery program. Students who are not motivated will need additional supports beyond those observed and described during the student interviews. They may require an added level of instructional and social-emotional support to be successful in this learning environment. The students in the study could see the light at the end of the tunnel as graduation was quickly approaching, and I am hopeful that each of them successfully

completed their credit recovery course and had the opportunity to experience high school graduation.

Lab Facilitators

Lab facilitators were responsible for overseeing the labs at each site. Based on my observations and the responses I received from students, facilitators' roles were limited throughout the course. For the students, it did not matter whether the lab facilitator was engaged in what they were learning or not. What mattered was their own engagement in the content (Holland, 2014). I understand from my role as a district administrator that lab facilitators play an important role at the beginning of the course by communicating the expectations and laying the foundation in getting students started. Pettyjohn's (2012) research informs us that on-site mentoring is especially critical during the first two weeks of the course when students are insecure and face problems with enrolling and accepting the responsibility of managing their online courses. Based on my interview and observation data, it would be beneficial for lab facilitators to become more engaged in the progress of credit recovery students. Instructors must foster a model in the classroom that promotes self-control, efficacy, optimism, and the responsibility of the learner (McMillian & Reed, 1994). Lab facilitators may not have the content knowledge to assist students, however, they are not restricted from engaging and interacting with students to build better relationships. I contend that they should be providing social and emotional support, in addition to serving as a resource for the students. This could include bridging the instructional gap by inviting their content specific peers to the lab for check-ins and assistance.

Participants from my study also described the tactics that they use to successfully navigate their credit recovery courses. If lab facilitators have a better understanding of these strategies, they could create learning plans to help prepare students for success in their credit recovery courses. Lab facilitators may be able to gain other takeaways from the findings in this study to improve their practice. According to Pettyjohn (2012), a lab facilitator's role is narrow and immediate. They support students by assisting with technical issues, providing a risk-free environment to seek help and answer questions, and monitor student progress. Further, when students believe that they are entering a partnership with their facilitators, they are more likely to remain in school and complete their online coursework (Ash, 2011). This is a unique component of an online learning environment.

The desired role for lab facilitators would include more frequent contact with students at a deeper level, while expressing concern with all facets of the students' lives, not just their academics. Existing literature is replete with descriptions of how a personal connection is vital for at-risk student success (Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Christle et al., 2007; Oliver et al., 2009; Schaeffer & Konetes, 2010). Lab facilitators should incorporate culturally responsive teaching strategies to develop meaningful connections between what students learn in school and their cultures, languages, and life experiences. These connections will help students access rigorous curriculum, develop higher-level academic skills, and see the relevance between what they learn at school and their lives (Understood, n.d.). Schools that use culturally responsive teaching strategies are finding the practice to be powerful in reaching all students. Incorporating this in the credit

recovery lab would be appropriate to raise expectations for students, help students feel valued and empowered, and help facilitators get to know their students even better.

Recommendations for Future Research

This basic qualitative research study was conducted to answer the question "What are Black students' experiences in credit recovery programs?" Although there is a limited body of literature on credit recovery programs, credit recovery is increasingly being used in districts across the country to meet the needs of students who lack the required number of credits to graduate. To expand upon this work, my focus was to increase my understanding of the Black student experience in credit recovery through interviews, observations, field notes, and journaling. For future research, it would be beneficial to investigate additional sites to provide a more comprehensive study and expand to more participants. An added comprehensive study would allow more participants to discuss their experiences regarding support, perception, and self-developed strategies. This recommendation could include multiple districts to collect a variance of student and staff demographics in comparison to the findings from this study. In addition, a future study that focuses on credit recovery lab facilitators would be helpful in capturing the essence of strategies used to facilitate this type of learning environment. The recommendations that emerged from the study could add to the scant research related to credit recovery. Due to the lack of literature that specifically addresses instructional models in online credit recovery environments, more research is needed to guide districts across the country on what specific actions must be employed by stakeholders in leadership positions.

Reflection

My data collection methods allowed me to interview and observe students who were at least 18 years old, racially classified as Black, and enrolled in one or more credit recovery courses. I was able to learn a lot about the student experience directly from them instead of formulating my own perceptions of what they should be doing in the program. My professional role allowed me to observe credit recovery labs previously but not in the same capacity as I experienced them as a researcher. This study provided me insight on suggested improvements to the district's credit recovery implementation, such as organizing ongoing professional learning opportunities for lab facilitators and improving school-based support structures to better assist students enrolled in the program. I believe lab facilitators need to be held more accountable for the results of their students and should model the practices of the most effective facilitators across the district. I learned how the district's theoretical vision for credit recovery contrasted with the practical execution at the school level. I understood the self-paced design of the program, however, I was unaware of just how much the program depended on student self-regulation. Self-regulated learning could be problematic for the most vulnerable learners who have previously struggled academically. It was evident during my data collection that the participating students were self-motivated and their behavior reflected the ultimate goal that they were striving to achieve. Their self-regulated behaviors contribute to the district's three-year credit recovery pass rate average of 75%.

During the time of my study, COVID-19 forced schools to shut down for the remainder of the spring semester. My data collection was complete, but revisions had to

be made to the district's credit recovery program. Curriculum modifications were updated to reduce the amount of content required in the courses. For seniors, this was a good opportunity to catch up if they were behind to earn the necessary graduation credits. Students were also offered a session during the summer months if they were unable to complete their credit recovery course from the spring. I often thought about the participating seniors from my study and wondered how well they performed during their final semester. Unfortunately, due to the closure of schools, I was unable to reconnect with the students to follow up on these questions. I also wondered how their postsecondary plans worked out, how many applied to college, and how many remained at home in quarantine waiting for the pandemic to pass.

My data collection methods were significant in helping me answer the question, "What are Black students' experiences in credit recovery programs?" Through this study, I was able to gain a better understanding of these experiences. I was able to learn what the students attributed their success, in addition to realizing the barriers that discourage them in completing their credit recovery courses. The study formed my belief that all stakeholders should collectively work together to ensure that the proper support follows this sub-group of students, so they can achieve their highest potential and reduce the drop-out rate of Black students across America.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

INTERVIEWEE REQUIREMENTS:

- Racially categorized as Black
- 18 years and older
- Enrolled in credit recovery

RESEARCH QUESTION:

What are Black students' experiences in credit recovery programs?

- What do participating students attribute their success to?
- What barriers discourage students' efforts to complete credit recovery courses?

INTERVIEW & PROBING QUESTIONS:

Introductory Questions

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. What has been your experience as a student over the years (elementary, middle, high)?
3. Do you remember the first class that you failed in high school?
   a. Did you retake the course or recover it in credit recovery?
4. What credit recovery class(es) are you taking?
5. What is your goal for taking credit recovery classes (learning or just getting through it)?
6. What has the credit recovery process been like for you?
7. What is a typical day like for you in the credit recovery lab?
   a. Can you give me examples?

Attributes to Success/Barriers

1. Do you classify yourself as a motivated learner? Why/Why not?
2. What were your experiences in the traditional class that caused you to fail the course that you are now recovering?
   a. If you could change anything about that experience, what would it be?
3. What was the response of your family when you failed the original course?
4. What strategies can you use to make sure you successfully complete your course?
5. What supports do you need to be successful?
6. What do you think is the expectation for you in this lab? (expectation from teachers, counselors, principals, peers)
   a. Why do you feel that way?
7. What have you found to be challenging in working through your credit recovery course?

Goal Setting

1. Have you discussed goals toward graduation and course completion with anyone at school? How did the conversation go?
2. What actions has your credit recovery teacher taken that motivate/support you during class?
3. What advice do you have for other students who may need credit recovery?
4. What are your future goals?
5. How can credit recovery help you meet your future goals?

Conclusion

1. What else would you like to share with me about the credit recovery program?

APPENDIX B

OBSERVATION GUIDE

Prompts developed based on existing research from Merriam and Tisdell (2016)

Physical Setting

What is the physical environment like?
What is the context?
What kinds of behavior is the setting designed for?
How is space allocated? What objects, resources, technologies are in the setting?

Participants

Describe who is in the scene, how many people, and their roles.
What brings these people together?
Who is allowed here?
Who is not here that you would expect to be here?
What are the relevant characteristics of the participants?
Further, what are the ways in which the people in this setting organize themselves?

Activities and interactions

What is going on?
Is there a definable sequence of activities?
How do the people interact with the activity and with one another?
How are people and activities connected?
What norms or rules structure the activities and interactions?
When did the activity begin?
How long does it last?
Is it a typical activity, or unusual?

Conversations

What is the content of conversations in this setting?
Who speaks to whom? Who listens?
Quote directly, paraphrase, and summarize conversations.
If possible, use a tape recorder to back up your notetaking.
Note silences and non-verbal behavior that add meaning to the exchange

Subtle factors

Informal and unplanned activities
Symbolic and connotative meanings of words
Nonverbal communication such as dress and physical space
Unobtrusive measures such as physical clues
What does not happen, especially if certain things ought to happen or are expected to happen?

My own behavior

You are as much a part of the scene as participants.
How is your role, whether as an observer or an intimate participant, affecting the scene you are observing?
What do you say and do?

What thoughts are you having about what is going on?
These become observer comments, an important part of field notes